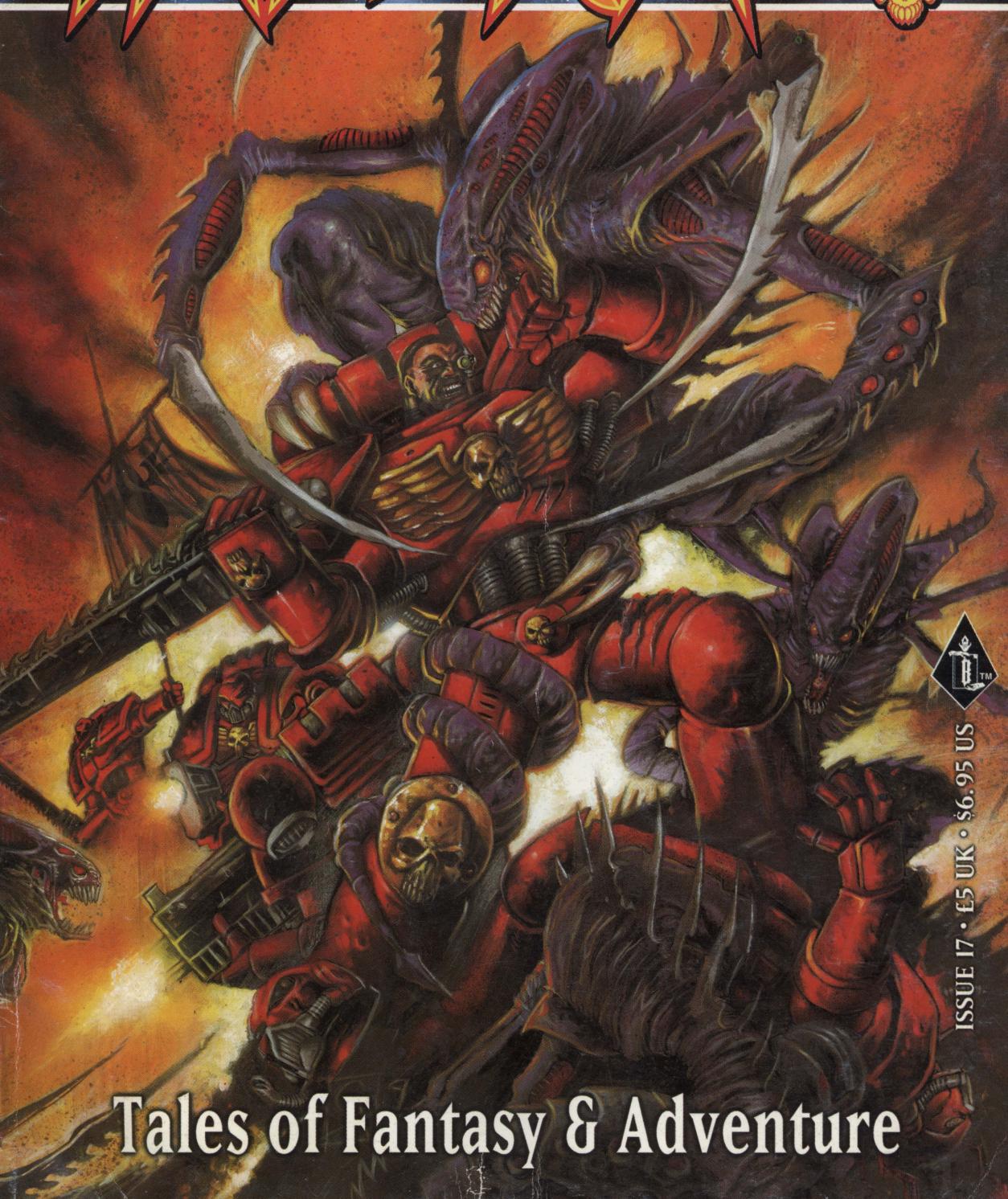


INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

WELCOME, welcome to the bigger, glossier, flashier... but otherwise just as brilliant new Inferno! Well, it was a new century, bigger and bolder than before, so we thought we would have something of a spring clean, liven up the old soldier a little. Since our new range of Warhammer Monthly graphic novel collections has been very well-received, it seemed natural to tie-in our new-look Inferno! to the same successful format too.

You know, Inferno! magazine was the very first dusty volume we managed to prise out of the Black Library, that legendary repository of all that is arcane and unknowable in the Warhammer 40,000 universe, almost three years ago now. Why, it hardly seems like yesterday when that first issue thundered out the doors and off into the great wide galaxy. Since then, as you may know, its marvellous mix of short stories, comic strips, cutaway features and illustrations has spawned

a vast range of comics, graphic novels, story collections and a whole string of new novels, with plenty more surprises to come. But Inferno! has always remained true to its basic remit: bringing our worlds to life.

For me, the fascinating and enjoyable thing about Inferno! is that through its pages, we allow a variety of writers and artists the freedom to reveal their own take on the Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 worlds – almost as if they were real living, breathing, actual worlds. For in a sense, they are. Every time someone writes a story, draws a comic strip or, yes, plays a game of Warhammer, in some way they are adding a tiny new bit of detail to these already lovingly described worlds, making them even richer and more exciting than before.

If truth be told, we're all rather fond of this unusual anthology of stories and art. What's more, we know that many faithful readers like it too, judging by the letters we get. Oh, which reminds me – we're

considering publishing more of your letters and emails within these pages, if you're willing, so if you have anything to share with us about our stories or strips, or indeed the Warhammer universe in general, feel free to drop us a line or email us at the address in the box below.

To close, I guess there is one more change that I should mention: I'm not Andy, I'm Marco. I'm the one who sat there in the background, putting it all together while AJ delivered his editorial words from on high. Well, Andy's hopped up a bit, leaving the way clear for me to leap in and claim all of Inferno! for my very own! Which is not to say he's gone very far – he's still sat at the same old desk just across the office, working on some new, no doubt very high-powered projects. It's just that it's all my fault now, he tells me. Ulp! Wish me luck!

*Marc Gascoigne
Editor*

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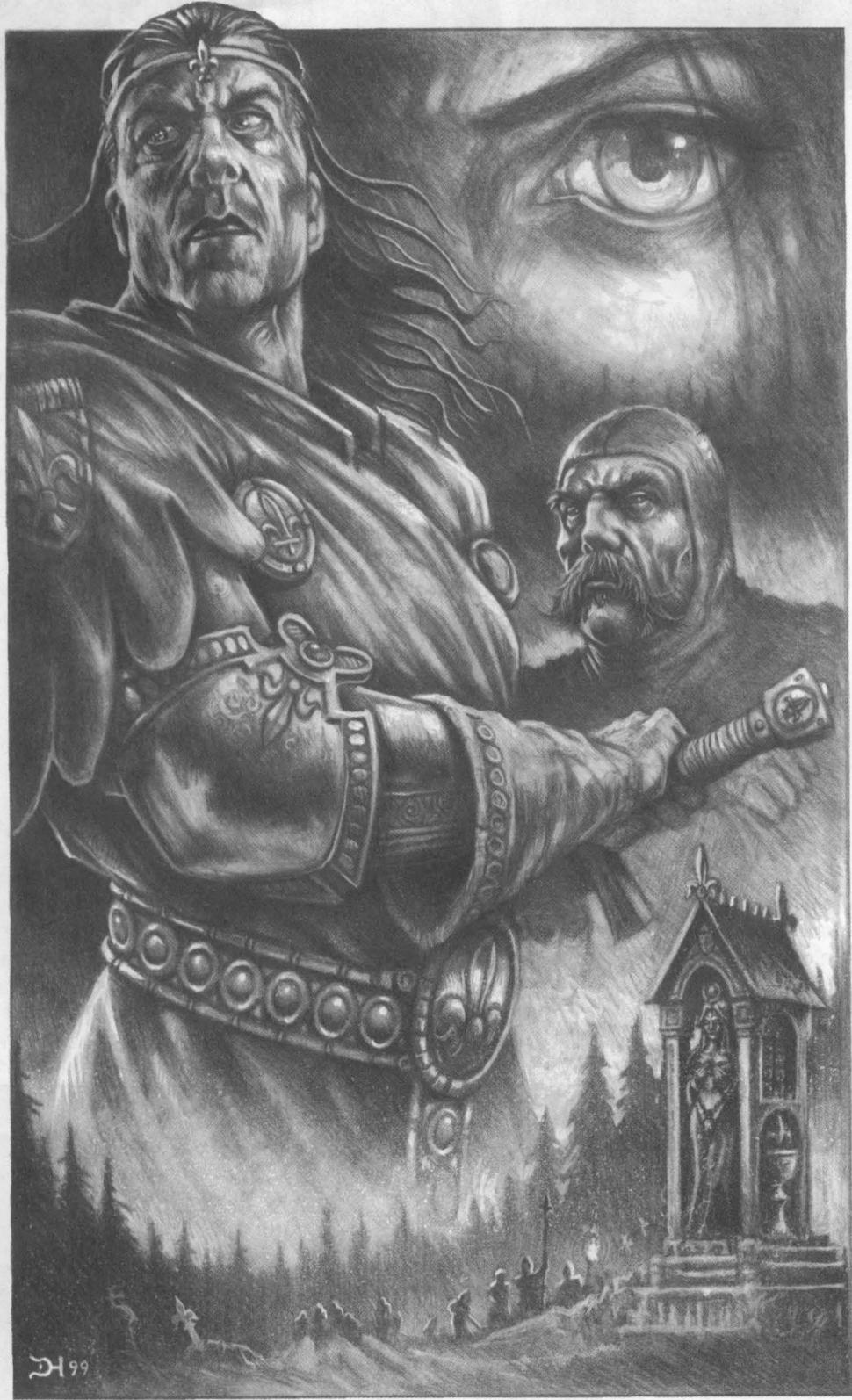
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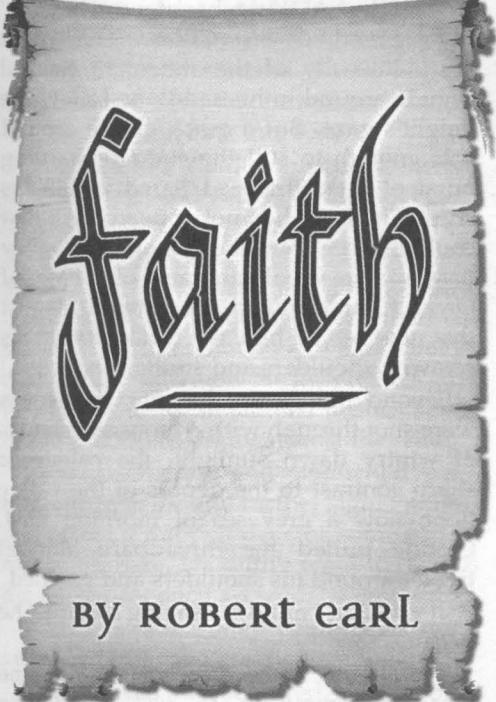
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faith

BY ROBERT EARL

WHAT ABOUT this one?" Claude the retainer asked with poorly disguised irritation, holding up the bloody prize.

'As I've already told you,' his master replied sharply, 'that is not good enough. I want something... more.'

Claude shrugged and dropped the blood-spattered head back into the dust. The orc's rictus grin leered up at him insolently, but he resisted the urge to give it a kick. Knights had funny ideas about things like that. But then, knights had funny ideas about a lot of things.

With a grunt of disgust Claude turned his back on the grisly trophy and stalked off to collect this evening's firewood. As he reached the tree-line he heard the sibilant hiss of whetstone against steel. It was the first of the evening's hundred sweeps, the ritual that kept the knight's sword sharper than any tooth or fang in this wilderness.

In spite of himself, Claude felt the sound cutting through his ill humour. This de Moreaux, Gilles, the third of his line to rely upon the old retainer's good offices, was the first to have taken care of his own weapons. And when Claude's rheumatism

had bitten deep, curling and crippling his hands, Sir Gilles himself had ordered the older man to rest whilst he foraged and rooted for the herbs needed for a cure. Not many knights would have lowered themselves so far as to serve a servant.

On the other hand, not many knights would still be traipsing around the Massif Orcal at this time of year for any reason, let alone an apparently never-ending quest for a trophy large and impressive enough to return with.

Claude, stooping to lift a dry twist of wood from the debris that littered the forest, grimaced at the thought. True, the sun was still warm on the leathered skin at the nape of his neck, and even this mild exercise of bundling firewood was beginning to dampen his brow. But despite the comfortable heat the leaves on the trees of this valley were already beginning to redder with an autumnal fire. A thousand traceries of red and gold raced and tumbled through the green sweeps of their boughs, a final explosion of colour before the skeletal days to come. He knew that in a fortnight, a month at the most, those leaves would be gone, mulch beneath the ice and rain of winter.

He also knew that in a fortnight, a month at the most, the rheumatism would be back. Claude's fingers twitched at the thought. If he were still out here when the ice came there would be no escape from the pain. It would eat into his bones with a fervour beyond the powers of any poultice to soothe. Every movement would become an agony, every joint would ache like shattered glass. It was too much.

Still muttering to himself, the old man claimed a length of splintered branch to complete his load then turned back towards their makeshift camp. He found Sir Gilles sitting cross-legged by the edge of the clearing. Apart from the repetitive whisper of the sharpening stone along the blade of his sword, the young knight remained as upright and as silent as one of the Lady's stained glass saints.

Claude surreptitiously watched the blank mask of his master's face as he built their fire. Not the slightest hint or ripple of emotion stirred the even symmetry of his dark Bretonian features, yet still the old

man knew what lay behind the shuttered windows of the youngster's eyes. He knew, and in knowing despaired of a return to their demesne before winter's misery began.

It was all the fault of Gilles's brother, Leon. Leon the brave. Leon the fair. Leon who, after a scant two weeks of questing, had returned with a massive troll's head the size of a cartwheel and the blessing of the Lady.

If only Sir Gilles had found a prize to match that, Claude thought unhappily, we'd be home by now.

He struck a shower of sparks into the tinder heart of the fire and stooped to blow them into life, his sigh lost in the operation. A few tiny flames leapt up and Claude tended them, fed them, watched them grow. After a few moments the kindling was a fist of fire, bright even in the light of the setting sun. He imprisoned the blaze within a latticework of thicker sticks and swung the pot containing the evening's stew into the heat.

Only then did he realise that the sound of the whetstone had ceased. He glanced up at his master. The knight had sheathed his sword and slipped into that deep breathless trance that seemed to be the mark of his kind.

Knights! Claude shook his head resignedly. Thirty-four years as an equerry and his masters still remained a mystery to him. Perhaps it was because the Lady asked so much of them. Perhaps it was because they truly were a different breed. Who knew?

Claude shrugged and turned his attention back to the pot. As he stirred the glutinous soup, a sudden gust of wind sprinted down the valley, rustling through the falling leaves with a thousand chill fingers. One more harbinger of winter. Silently cursing the fate that seemed set to keep him here the old man pulled up his collar and waited for the stew to boil.



‘**T**HE LADY is beauteous indeed,’ breathed Sir Gilles. The quiet intensity of the statement twisted Claude around in his saddle to follow the knight's gaze. But a quick glance around was enough to still the sudden, startling burst of hope that had flared within his chest. The Lady had not appeared. All that could be seen from the eyrie of this valley pass was the usual panorama of the Massif Orcal. Claude pulled the tattered blanket that now served him as a cloak around his scrawny shoulders and studied the scene.

Beyond the distant heights, the slopes were shot through with a thousand shades of wintry dawn sunlight, the colours a sharp contrast to the depths of the valley floor, now a grey sea of morning mist. Claude pulled his threadbare blanket tighter around his shoulders and yawned.

‘If you don't mind me saying so, sire—’ he began.

‘We should make the most of the fine weather remaining to us,’ Sir Gilles completed for him. The look of rapture faded from his face and he turned to regard his old retainer. ‘You are correct, of course, Claude. First, though, I will sit a while in this place. I feel her presence here, I'm sure of it. Why don't you wait for me over the slope, and perhaps brew some of that filthy Empire tea of which you are so fond?’

This last was with a smile, the first crack in the knight's iron mask for days. The expression was as fleeting as the rise of a trout, yet in that brief moment Claude had read the lines of frustration and exhaustion that his master's composure had so well concealed. For a moment the old man felt his own worries swamped in a swell of sympathy.

‘I'll wait as you say, sire,’ he assented, turning to lead their horses over the crest of the ridge. Behind him Sir Gilles sank to his knees, hands clasped together in silent prayer before the upright hilt of his sword. As he set to beside the fire once more, Claude snatched a quick glance at the tableaux. He felt a sudden burst of affection and shook his head.

‘You're getting sentimental in your old age,’ he scolded himself in a mutter as he split the kindling sticks needed to boil his water. ‘Too sentimental by half.’

The ripe globe of the autumnal sun climbed into the cloud streaked depths of the sky. Claude sat and drank his tea. When he had done that he laid back and let the warmth of it sink into him.

Sharp-edged shadows stalked across distant slopes and valleys as the sun began to rise higher. The light was bright but unnatural, thin and brittle like before a storm. Claude was watching a hawk spiral overhead on the first of the day's thermals when a furtive movement from below snatched his attention. He lowered his gaze to where a grove of stunted bushes below rustled and moved jerkily against the wind.

Claude froze and watched the undergrowth for any further sign. Perhaps it was just a trapped deer, or some sort of mountain hare. He didn't want to disturb his master for such a-

With a sudden snap the bushes burst apart and a ragged creature sprang out.

'Sire!' the old man bellowed, leaping to his feet with adrenaline-fuelled agility. He fumbled at his belt for his dagger, struggling to unsheathe it in time, and snatched a glance at the ragged creature that even now approached him. Only then did he realise that beneath the layers of dirt and bracken it was human, a man. He found himself fumbling for words of greeting or warning but, before he could find either weapon or challenge, Sir Gilles arrived.

His appearance was silent, marked only by a sudden rush of displaced air. Gone was the man, the youngster Claude had known since his swaddling days. Gone was the tiredness, the yearning. Gone was the humanity. All that remained of Sir Gilles now was the knight, the steel-clad killing machine. The dark storm cloud of his cloak whipped around him, driven either by the wind or by the corona of terrible energy that radiated from him. Claude, without even noticing that he was doing so, flinched away from his own master.

Despite the layers of metal which encased his form Sir Gilles bounded forward with all the grace and poise of a big cat. With the hiss of steel slicing through air his sword was in his hand as he leapt towards the newcomer.

'Thank the gods!' the man said, his features wild with a confusion of fear and happiness. After a moment's hesitation he threw himself to his knees. 'Our prayers have been answered.'

The knight hefted the length of his sword, flicking it upwards in an effortless arc that sent a wink of sunlight flashing along the edge. And for a moment, just one moment, Claude was certain that the blade was about to guillotine down across the new comer's shoulders. But of course it did not. The Lady, bless and protect her, would not have allowed it.

Yet how would it be, the old retainer suddenly found himself wondering, if the knights of Bretonnia should lose their respect for the Lady?

Claude shuddered, suddenly cold, and switched his attention to the stranger who still knelt before Sir Gilles.

'...prayed for you to come for weeks. It's become too much, far too much,' the man continued to babble, tears glinting unashamedly in the corners of his eyes. 'None of us can sleep at night, none of us can work. Where are they going, where? One more and we're leaving, I swear it.'

The man's voice was beginning to edge upwards into the realms of hysteria. Seeming to realise it he paused and took a deep breath. Then turned his red-rimmed eyes back to the knight.

'You will help us, sire, won't you?'

Sir Gilles, who until now had remained poised for combat, suddenly relaxed. He sheathed the wicked length of his sword and raised his visor to reveal a hungry, wolfish smile.

'Have no fear. I am sworn to help men such as yourself,' he reassured the peasant, whose grubby features split open into a wide grin of relief. 'How far is this village of yours?'

'In the next valley, sire. If you have horses it will take a few hours at the most.'

'Yes, we have horses. Perhaps you can help Claude here saddle up... ah, how are you called?'

'Jacques, sire, Jacques de Celliers. And thank you.'

Sir Gilles waved away the man's gratitude and turned to face the bright rays of the mid morning sun. Claude led the newcomer to the horses. It took them a few minutes to saddle the beasts and lead them back to where the knight still stood.

Somehow Claude was not surprised to find his master's head bowed and his lips moving in a silent prayer of gratitude.



THE INN was packed. Even with the trestle tables pushed back into the shadows there hardly seemed room to breathe. Claude had even considered slipping back outside, away from the choke of this room, but somehow the tension of hope and fear that sawed through the smoke filled air kept him still. That and the presence of Sir Gilles, of course.

The knight sat comfortably within an almost tangible sphere of personal aura that none seemed willing to invade. He looked as calm and serene as always as he chatted to those around him about their crops, their children, the first signs of change in the season.

Claude saw the awe that washed across the features of those being spoken to, watched it being reflected on the faces of their neighbours. In a gesture that he would have denied even under torture he straightened his back and smiled with pride. Sir Gilles was, after all, his knight.

Not until François, the village elder, made his entrance did the meeting come to some sort of order. The inn door was thrown open by a burst of cold, eastern wind and the old man stalked into the warmth of the room. He had hooked one claw-like hand onto the shoulder of his nephew for support or perhaps guidance through the chill darkness that now laid siege to the building. Favouring Sir Gilles with what could just about have been taken for a half-bow he then studied the depths of his guest's face with yellowing eyes as puffy as poached eggs. For several long moments the two men regarded each

other until, with a grunt of satisfaction, François lowered himself onto one knee. Claude could almost hear his bones creaking.

'Please,' Sir Gilles said earnestly, 'there is no need to kneel, especially for one as steeped in the grey hairs of wisdom as yourself.'

'Thank you, lord,' François said curtly. His nephew helped him back to his feet and led him to the cut away oak barrel that served as the old man's seat of office. Knight and elder faced each other across the few feet of swept earth which lay between them and, in place of any common currency of small talk, smiled.

'I thank you for coming to our aid,' François began. 'I only wish I could tell you what we need that aid against.'

The knight shifted in his chair, eyes beginning to sparkle with a quickening interest.

'Your man Jacques here told me something of your dilemma,' he said, gesturing towards the peasant. Jacques, who had become something of a local hero since his return this afternoon, puffed himself up with pride at the mention. 'Perhaps, though, you could tell me the full history of these, ah, events.'

François nodded and sighed. Staring past the knight's head into some invisible point beyond the inn wall he began to speak, the years seeming to weigh down on him as he did so.

'It began after the first of the year's harvests, just after the festival of the summer corn,' he started, his voice dull and hopeless. 'This year we took a goodly crop, thanks to the brightness of the sun and the depths of the rains. In fact after we had filled the granaries we had a surplus. We felt rich so, for the first time in years, we stopped the river trader and exchanged a few bushels for gold. At first I thought – we all thought – that was what had led to Pierre's disappearance.'

'How so?' the knight demanded. He leant forward eagerly, elbow rested on one knee and eyes locked on the elder's tragic countenance. His right hand, seemingly of its own accord, had stolen down to brush against the hilt of his sword. Claude

regarded his master with a wry smile. Now that action beckoned he looked more warrior than gentleman, and more wolf than either.

François, though, seemed oblivious to this change in his guest's character. His attention had wandered far beyond the present murky depths of this world and into the past. He sighed and, with an obvious effort, dragged himself back to the here and now.

'How so? Well, because when a man has gold in his pocket and the sun is warming the stone of the high passes it's only natural for him to consider straying. Especially when...' *the door ajar*

François's eyes flickered upwards with a sudden guilty start and he broke off in consternation. Claude wondered what had caused his host's evident discomfiture until, from behind him, a woman's voice rang out.

'Especially when he's married to such a shrew. Isn't that what you were going to say, François de Tarn?'

Claude turned to regard the speaker. She was, he thought charitably, a solidly built woman. The black cloth of her smock looked hard-pressed to contain the bulk of her hips and chest. Despite her impressive girth, though, her face look pinched, sharp and hard even in the dull glow of the rush lights.

Shrew-like indeed, thought Claude sadly, and felt pity welling up inside of him. He could guess how it must have been for this woman when she tried to tell her neighbours of her husband's disappearance. How they must have frowned and talked of search parties in public whilst privately wishing the runaway all good speed.

'No, Celine, I wasn't going to say that,' the elder rallied, cutting through the thread of Claude's speculation. 'I was going to say when a husband and wife have problems... well, you know.'

'Yes, I know,' the widow sighed, suddenly deflated. François shrugged uncomfortably and ploughed on.

'Anyway, about a week after Pierre was taken we lost Charles. Then Alain the smith. Then Bastien. Then Fredric and

Sullier right afterwards. And then... then the children, Sophie and Louise...' His voice trailed off into nothingness and he swallowed painfully.

As the old man had recited the terrible litany of the lost it had been punctuated by choked sobs or low, miserable moans from the assembled villagers. Claude shifted uncomfortably. The air felt greasy with the grief and fear that was tearing this small community apart. The tension, almost unbearable, crushed down on his chest.

But if the weight of their misery had made any impression on Sir Gilles he wasn't showing it. The only emotion visible on the knight's face was a terrible hunger, an eagerness that reminded Claude of boar hounds straining at the leash. For the second time in as many days the old retainer faced the gulf that lay between them and shivered.

'So,' the knight said, his tones crisp and oblivious to the pain around him. 'What sort of intervals are we talking about between disappearances?'

'It varies.' François shrugged his shoulders. 'Between Pierre and Charles ten days. Between Sophie and Louise only three.'

'The children. Not as much meat on them, I suppose,' Sir Gilles mused aloud.

Behind him Claude heard a stifled cry and a rush of feet to the door.

'And you found no sign of a struggle? No smashed doors, no cries in the night?'

'No.' The elder paused for a moment, his eyes flickering over the assembly before he continued. 'Charles was taken from his very bed whilst his wife lay sleeping beside him.'

Sir Gilles nodded. One moment crawled slowly into the next, the time marked only by the rise and fall of the wind outside and the spluttering hiss of the rush lights within. When the knight finally spoke it was with a cry that sent those nearest to him lurching backwards.

'Of course! Where do you bury your dead?'

'In the crypt behind the shrine,' the elder replied, puzzlement adding a fresh tide of wrinkles to his brow. 'Why do you ask, lord?'

'And tell me, do you have a store of garlic here?' the knight continued uninterrupted.

'Of course, my lord. What kitchen doesn't?'

Claude shared the old man's confusion until, with a sudden flash of inspiration, he remembered a tale from one of the castle grimoires. A tale of nocturnal vanishings and blood black in the light of the moon. A tale of strange weapons, garlic and water and...

'The only other things you'll need are sharpened staves.' Sir Gilles rubbed his hands together and sighed with satisfaction. He looked, thought Claude with a touch of awe, like a man contemplating a feast or a day's hunting.

'Well,' the knight prompted his host after a moment or two. 'could you find such staves of which I speak?'

François, the bafflement which marked his liver-spotted features reflected in the faces of the rest of the assembly, nodded slowly.

'We can certainly make some, and that within the hour. But, my lord, Charles and Pierre were woodsmen, with woodsmen's axes. If their weapons failed them, what use will sticks be to us?'

Claude watched a touch of irritation flicker across the brown depths of the knight's eyes before he answered.

'Using steel against the thing which now preys upon you is like trying to drown a fish. No, don't ask me why. Only the Lady knows how these things gain their terrible strengths. All I know is that against the vampire the peasant's only weapon is wood, his only shield garlic.'

'The... vampire?' François asked, eyes widening in horror. A chorus of whimpers and low curses rushed through his fellows, the sound as soft and insistent as the chill wind that even now tried the locks and hinges of the inn.

Claude felt the hairs raise themselves one by one along the back of his neck as he moved unthinkingly with the press of bodies that huddled closer to the knight. As the crowd around him shifted with the restrained panic of a herd of cattle before the storm he noticed the furtive glances

they cast towards the shadowy corners of the inn and the rattling shutters of the windows.

Vampire! It was a name to chill the hardest of hearts, a name to conjure up a thousand half remembered terrors from the darkest nights of childhood. Claude was suddenly very grateful for the claustrophobic mass of warm bodies that were packed so tightly around him.

'Am I right in thinking, my lord.' François began with all the caution of a man taking the first step out onto a tightrope, 'that you intend to lead us against this beast?'

'No, I don't think so,' Sir Gilles replied. There was a sudden, angry murmur of protest from the crowd and, for the first time, the knight seemed to notice them. He looked up and the granite wall of his gaze cut off their protests.

'I won't be leading you good people anywhere,' he continued, turning back to François as if there had been no interruption. 'I will go now to await this monstrosity in the crypt you mentioned. Such things are usually tied to their burial grounds, making a mockery of these resting places with their filthy presence. Meanwhile you'll bring everyone back here tonight and arm yourselves against the creature's attack.'

A thoughtful silence descended upon the villagers. Claude could almost taste their relief.

'Any further questions?' the knight asked.

'I don't think so, sire.' François shook his head. 'But is there naught we can do for you?'

Sir Gilles looked into the old man's eyes and smiled, the expression cold and humourless. 'Yes. Make sure that nobody goes anywhere on their own until this is finished.'

'Even to the latrines?'

A ripple of nervous laughter spread through the confines of the room at this. Sir Gilles was pleased to hear it. Better foolish catcalls than blind terror.

'Even to the latrines,' he replied presently. 'Now, who will show us to this sepulchre?'

TIT WAS DARK and, despite the bulk of Claude's borrowed blankets, cold. He could smell the thin, metallic scent of rain on the wind and feel the choking weight of cloud that blocked out even the scant light of moon and stars. Only the guttering red fire of their rush lights gave the two figures any trace of light by which to keep their lonely vigil.

They sat like mismatched bookends on either side of the burial pit, these two, their very presence defying the hungry shadows of the sepulchre's maw. Claude glanced across at his master, a little awed as always by the man's inexhaustible capacity for stillness.

Only the silvery glitter of the knight's hooded eyes gave any indication that he was awake, or even alive. That same glitter was reflected in the straight-edged length of steel which lay across his begreaved knees. Sir Gilles had been strapped into his full armour as he had given the villagers their last instructions.

'Stay together. Even if it breaks in, don't panic. Stand shoulder to shoulder and call for me. But don't pursue it. Remember, stay together.'

Claude, remembering the earnestness of the young knight's expression and the terrified eyes of the villagers, smiled. Had Sir Gilles really believed any of that frightened herd would have charged a vampire, a drinker of souls?

The old retainer's grin faded as he studied the reassuring lines of his master's face. The steel dome of his helmet was gone, a concession against the near-blinding darkness that enveloped them, and even in the flickering half-light of their peasant torches Claude could see the look of peace which had fallen across Sir Gilles's trail-hardened features. The expression reminded him of the knight's father. He had had the same look about him on the night before the Battle of Ducroix. It was only at times like these, whilst sat in the very eye of the storm, that the Lady's chosen warriors seemed to find true peace.

A sudden burst of wind whistled around his ears and the old man shrank down further into his blankets. It had started to warm up within this little cocoon. Claude

yawned and stretched, luxuriating in the rare feeling of comfort. Gradually, little by little, his thoughts melted away into dreams.

He jerked back into wakefulness with a guilty start, eyes springing open like traps. It was too late. Sir Gilles was regarding him with the tolerant composure that the older man found so irritating. Claude opened his mouth, fumbling for an apology, but the knight silenced him with a gesture.

'Try to sleep, Claude. I will need your wits about me in the morning.'

'Sire, I said I would share your watch and I will.'

'And I said there was no need. Sleep. If I have need of you I will wake you, have no fear of that.'

'Well...' Claude began, then stopped and shrugged. The heavy droop of his eyelids weighed more than any arguments. And, at his age, what did he have left to prove?

'Thank you, sire.'

Sir Gilles nodded, the gesture almost imperceptible amongst the wind chased shadows of the night, and returned to his silent meditation.

A few moments later Claude began to snore. The wind, as if in response to the old man's guttural breathing, blew harder. It screeched through the draughty eaves of the burial pit, groping with icy fingers at the chinks and hinges of the knight's armour and setting the forest-lined slopes of the valley aroar. The distant trees rushed and splintered as though some mighty beast had been set loose amongst them.

Sir Gilles, unmoved by the rising tumult, sat and waited. Soon even the rise and fall of his servant's breath was drowned beneath the howls of the wind, but this hardly concerned him. And when the rush lights started to die, one by one, he merely smiled at the memory of how darkness had frightened him as a child. That fear was gone now. It had gone the way of all other fears during his training as a knight.

All other fears but one, of course, the last and the greatest. And with the Lady's help that final fear would be vanquished tonight.

The last of the torches died, its flame strangled by a sudden gust. In the blinding depths of the darkness that remained, Sir Gilles sat and awaited his destiny, a murmur of thanks on his lips.

If he survived this night's trial he knew that he would be blessed indeed. If he survived this night all would know that the blood of his line ran true in his veins and that his faith in the Lady was true. Yes, all would know it. Even himself.

He just hoped that the vampire, when it came, would be the equal of its reputation.



CLAUDE AWOKE to dew-soaked blankets and tingling joints. His knuckles felt hot and swollen, blistered from within. There was no real pain, not yet, but in the vulnerability of the single unguarded moment that separates sleep from wakefulness he made a mistake. He thought about what might be going on beneath his reddening skin.

He imagined the gristle in his fingers swelling, choking off the blood. He imagined the nerve endings rasping and sawing against granite-edged bone, fraying like lengths of twine. He imagined a colony of rat-headed creatures eating into the very stuff of him, their burrows growing deeper and more painful by the minute.

With a low moan he clenched his fists, damning the first sparks of pain the movement ignited. The cold, he knew, would fan those first few sparks, tend them and feed them until they twisted his hands into crippled, burning claws.

Well, to the hells with it. If he had need of his hands the Lady would unclench them. And if the pain became unbearable the Lady would take it away. In one way or another, She would take it away.

The old man sighed and opened his eyes. The dawn sky above him was as sombre and cheerless as a shroud, lacking even a smear of cumulus to cut through its grey monotonous weight. Claude shrugged

indifferently and climbed to his feet. At least it wasn't raining. He wrapped his blankets around his thin shoulders and yawned. Time to start on breakfast. Now where had he left those damn horses?

He coughed, more out of habit than anything else, and swept the camp with his gaze. It wasn't until he noticed the dark bulk of the sepulchre that remembrance hit him with an impact as dizzying as vertigo.

This was no trail camp, no woodland clearing or rocky overhang. There would be no quiet breakfast routine here, no wistful meditations. This was Celliers, the village where Sir Gilles had finally found a monster worth killing.

But Sir Gilles was nowhere to be seen.

'Sire?' Claude called, his voice cracked with sleep and uncertainty.

'Sire?' he called again, louder this time against the dumbing curtain of fine mist that had begun to dampen the air.

There was no reply. Claude wrapped the roll of blankets tighter around the frail stalk of his neck and studied the ground. A deep depression still marked the spot where the knight must have kept his vigil last night, although some of the crumpled blades of grass had already sprung defiantly back. The old man shook his head and hissed. His master must have been gone a fair while.

'Sire?'

No reply.

He looked further and studied the semi-circle of burnt out torches that surrounded the spot. Their black stumps jutted out of the damp earth like a jaw full of bad teeth. None of them, it seemed, had been disturbed.

'Si-?' Claude began, and then froze. He listened, straining his ears against the blanket of drizzle that had begun to fall. For a while there was nothing more than the muffled sounds of a damp and dreary morning and the distant croak of pheasant. One minute crawled towards the next, then the next. Finally the old man began to relax. His ears must have been playing tricks on him, he decided.

Then he heard it again.

The low moan drifted as softly as a dandelion seed on the morning's breeze. Claude listened cautiously as the cry faded back into nothingness and shivered suddenly as it ceased. His fingers, arthritis forgotten, clenched tightly around the heft of his stake.

Surely that weak and inhuman keening couldn't be from a man, he told himself, let alone a knight.

Yet where was Sir Gilles?

Once more the cry came floating through the haze, raising the wiry hairs on the back of Claude's neck. He waited until the fell voice began to wane and then, with a blasphemous combination of curses and prayers, the old retainer lurched forwards towards the sound.

He left the burial pit behind him and stomped past the dripping grey bulk of the village shrine and the first of the houses. The village seemed as desolate and empty as any ghost town. There were no scurrying children or scolding women or singing artisans. All that moved here was the drizzle, its silent rain weighing down on an atmosphere already leaden with dread.

The moan came again, louder this time. Louder and closer. In fact, Claude decided as he shivered the weight of blankets off his shoulders, whatever was making the noise seemed to be around the next corner.

A ghostly reflection of his master's wolverine smile played around the old man's lips, a nervous reaction as he plucked the dagger from his belt with his free hand. Then, with a last murmured prayer to the Lady, he stepped around the corner.

And froze.

Sir Gilles was there, the centrepiece of the huddled mob of peasants. The sight of his broad armoured shoulders shook a delighted bark of laughter from Claude, who allowed the wavering point of his stave to drop.

'Sire! You're all right?'

'Yes, of course,' the knight replied, a pair of puzzled lines marking his brow as he turned. 'Why shouldn't I be?'

Claude shrugged, still smiling with relief. Then the plaintive wail that had brought him here rang out again and for the first time he noticed the girl.

She squatted in the cold and damp of the earth, supported on either side by two solidly built village women. They flanked her protectively, like two mother hens with a single chick, but she obviously drew scant comfort from their presence. The girl herself was pitifully thin, the bundled rags she wore incapable of hiding the frailty of her frame. Every shuddering breath she took seemed to rattle down the knuckles of her vertebrae, every choking sob seemed ripe to burst the tight cage of her chest.

Claude felt obscurely glad that her face was turned away from him. He had heard such misery before, of course. From battlefields and deathbeds and scaffolds he had become familiar with the sound of the human heart torn and bleeding. Yet had he ever heard such horror mixed in with the grief?

Without giving himself time to think the old man pushed forward into the mass of cringing villagers who encircled the girl. He looked over her shoulder to the... the *shape* that lay upon the crimson turf.

Just think of it as meat, he told himself. It's not human. Not now.

But the signs of the thing's humanity were still horribly plain to see. Almost half of its face had been left, the exposed tendons and drained flesh conspiring to lock the man's face into a final eternal scream. Some of its fingers also remained. They were as rigid and gnawed as the branches of autumnal trees and even more dead. Claude studied the savaged expanses of the man's forearms, shoulders and neck. The frenzy of half-moon bite marks somehow reminded him of a head of corn.

Biting back a sudden rush of bile the old man looked away and studied the faces of the villagers whilst composing himself. He read the disgust and frightened rage he had expected, the emotions as clear as any sculpture could ever make them. But there was something else there too, something that skulked guiltily behind their horror like rats behind a skirting board.

It took Claude a moment to recognise it as relief. The realisation snared his revulsion, gave it a target. Selfish swines! Relieved for their own worthless skins even with this child choking her heart out over the corpse of her father. His lips drawn back in a silent snarl, he turned to François, the village elder.

'I thought you were told not to let anybody go out on their own,' he spat.

But if François heard the anger in Claude's voice he gave no sign of it. 'We didn't let anyone go out on their own. Jules here, Lady guide and protect him, went out with Jacques. Jacques whose absence from the village stopped the killings. And whose return brought them back.'

Claude stepped back and dug thumbs into his forehead in an effort to stop the turmoil of his thoughts.

'Look at the wounds on Jules,' François added. 'What beast leaves marks like that?'

Claude gazed steely eyed at the carcass. It was the same as a hundred others he had witnessed. His career had led him through many valleys a lot more death-filled than this one. He had seen savaged bodies abandoned by all manner of wild beasts. Aye, he thought grimly, and ones trained to it too. And yet something about this one was different.

'Of course!' he finally cried out, voice thick with horrid realisation. 'The teeth. The bite marks. They're like mine. I mean like any human's,' he added hurriedly – even this far from the border, Sigmar's hungry witch hunters had ears – and daggers. 'So Jacques was the vampire?'

'No, he's no vampire,' Sir Gilles cut in with a sigh. 'He only has human teeth. He's just a man. A sick man.'

'Sick?'

'Yes, sick of mind. Or Chaos-tainted perhaps. It matters not. My cousin told us of it the last time he returned from the Empire. There they call it the madness of Morrslieb, the contagion that flows from the Blood Moon when it's at its zenith. That is when your problems began, isn't it?'

This last was addressed to François. The old man shrugged vaguely, then nodded.

'Madness indeed,' Claude muttered, taking a last look at the corpse which lay congealing in front of its daughter. 'Shall I prepare the horses, sire?'

'Yes. Light tack. Against this pitiful creature we'll need speed more than power. François, are there any hounds here?'

As Claude turned to ready their horses, he heard the bitterness of the disappointment that edged his master's words. He realised that above the sobs that still wove through the mist only he had heard it, and for that he was thankful.



THE DAY'S HUNT was a futile affair. The only hounds to be found in the village were a trio of aged boar hounds, gaunt beasts whose stiff movements and swollen joints made Claude wince in sympathy. Sir Gilles, still hiding his disappointment behind a flawlessly polite mask, had decided to leave the motley pack behind, overruling François's attempts to press the dogs into service by explaining that speed of horse and clarity of vision would suffice to hunt down the fugitive.

It had proved to be a foolish boast. The beast of Celliers, although only a man and a crazed one at that, had vanished with all the ingenuity and cunning of any other animal. As Claude followed Sir Gilles out of the village the impossibility of their task struck him. What chance did they stand of finding the fugitive in the mighty swathe of forests and crevasses that covered this, his native territory?

By the time they had cleared the fields and broken into a canter the old man had begun to wonder why the same thought hadn't occurred to his master. It wasn't until Sir Gilles, with a wild cry that ignited frustration into exhilaration, closed spurs that Claude finally understood.

Their task here was complete. Jacques was gone. They might catch him, they probably wouldn't. Either way it made little difference to the lunatic. Alone and

unarmed against the predators and dark races of this savage land he wouldn't last long.

He gave his own horse its head, allowing it to race along behind the knight's charger. Holding on to his mount with aching knees, branches slashing over his head and the wind stinging his eyes, Claude listened to the rolling thunder of their horses' hooves and felt a rush of excitement course through him.

By the Lady this was the life! Ahead of him, pulling away as swiftly and as surely as a stag from a drunken orc, Sir Gilles crested a low hill. By the time Claude had reached the spot the knight was already disappearing into the arms of the wood that lay beyond. Just before he was lost to sight the armoured figure turned in the saddle and called back.

'The pass. Meet me at the pass.'

'Aye, sire, the pass it is.' Claude bellowed his reply as Sir Gilles vanished. As if sensing that the race was lost Claude's horse slackened its pace from gallop to canter to brisk walk.

'Lazy beast,' he muttered affectionately as they plodded along. The blood was still racing briskly through his veins after the impromptu charge and, despite the continuing grey dampness of the day, his spirits were high. And why not? Celliers's problems had been resolved, the beast had been vanquished. Even if he did return to the village, the madman, now that he had been unmasked, would find little chance of repeating his atrocities. For the people of this valley, at least, the winter would hold no more than the usual dangers. For himself and his master, though...

Claude sighed, his high spirits draining away at the thought of the coming months. 'I'm too old for this,' he told nobody in particular and spurred his mount into a canter.

By the time he reached the high saddle of the pass, Sir Gilles's horse was already grazing contentedly. The knight himself sat perched atop a boulder, dark eyes scanning the valley below. His aquiline nose and deep, predatory stare made him look a little like a beast himself, Claude thought as he toiled up the final

approaches to the pass.

'It seems the king has more than one hippocriff,' he muttered to himself, the words lost beneath the clatter of scree underfoot.

'I'll take that as a compliment,' Sir Gilles called out as his man approached. Claude bit back on the expression of mortification he knew had crept treacherously across his weathered features and shrugged.

'And how else would I have meant it, sire?' he asked ingenuously.

Sir Gilles barked with laughter and jumped lightly from the boulder. The tension of the preceding days seemed to have melted away leaving the young man full of fresh energy. It was almost as if the conclusion of Celliers's problems, bloody and seedy as it had been, had lifted a weight from his shoulders – almost as if his task had been accomplished.

Claude hardly dared to ask, but the sudden rush of hope within his chest was too much to be denied.

'Sire...' he began, then hesitated, not quite knowing how to put the question. A moment's confusion passed before he shrugged and ploughed on: 'Is our quest complete?'

The knight's brows shot up in amazement as he studied his old retainer.

'No, of course not. Why should it be?'

'You seem... rejuvenated.' Claude explained, trying to keep the weight of disappointment out of his voice, out of his posture. It was hard work.

'I thought maybe you had seen the Lady after, you know, saving the village,' he continued with another shrug.

Sir Gilles's brow cleared with sudden realisation.

'I understand,' he nodded. 'But no, I have done nothing yet. And yet I do feel as if a burden has been lifted. I've come to a decision. I'm going to exchange greaves and bucklers and lances for furs and push on into the heart of these mountains. It is only there that I can be sure of proving the strength of my belief in the Lady and continue slaying the evil that would devour her people.'

Claude felt a moment's unease as he watched the features of the knight harden, straightening into a mask of fanaticism stronger than any steel. Even after all these years this transformation of his masters from men into something... *something more* still sent a cold shiver racing down his spine.

But then his master was once more just Sir Gilles. His expression softened as he turned his attention from the jagged spikes of distant mountains to his faithful old retainer. 'The other decision I've made is that you'll stay in Celliers until I return. Or until the summer, whichever comes first. I'll leave you gold and a letter of safe conduct in case I am found, um, wanting.'

Now it was Claude's turn to look amazed.

'Sire, I will not leave you. I am sworn to follow you on this quest. My honour is at stake as much as yours.'

'You are sworn to obey!' the knight snapped, his tones suddenly harsh. 'And by the Lady you will! I'll not take any ill man into the ice and snow of mountains in the winter. And I'll certainly not throw your life away.'

In a gesture that looked strangely guilty Claude thrust his reddening knuckles behind his back.

'Sire, I—'

'You'll obey my orders,' Sir Gilles cut him off. 'Apart from anything else I don't want to waste one of my father's best men. You will stay here.'

The old man, who suddenly looked much, much older, dropped his eyes and slumped his shoulders. Without another word he turned back to his horse.

With a last resentful look towards his master Claude led his mount down the shifting carpet of scree and tried not to let his anger get the better of him. To be cast aside now, left in safety like a woman whilst his knight rode off into bitter danger! Was he an idiot or a cripple to be left on the roadside like a piece of useless baggage? It was an outrage.

What made it even more difficult to bear was the treacherous sense of relief that even now buoyed up his steps. But that, at least, proved to be short-lived.

WHAT DO YOU mean you're leaving? Are you mad?' Sir Gilles barely controlled his exasperation, but at a cost. His wind-rouged cheeks reddened further and a small vein began to pulse a warning above his brow. If the village elder noticed these small chinks in his guest's composure he gave no sign of it.

Without taking his eyes off the two men who continued to overburden his haywain, François sighed and shook his head. 'No, we're not mad. Madness would be to stay.'

'We found something after you went, ah, hunting this morning.' The elder flicked a glance almost contemptuously over the mud flecked flanks of the knight's horse. Her mighty chest heaving in great lungfuls of air and the heavy organic smell of horse sweat radiated off her in waves. After Claude had returned, his foul temper buried under consternation at the sight of Celliers packing up to go, Sir Gilles had ridden back here as hard as he could, sparing neither his horse nor himself.

'What did you find?' the knight finally asked, successfully keeping the irritation to himself.

'Jacques.' François said the word softly, almost reverently, and Sir Gilles wondered at his tones. What terrible vengeance must these villagers, his erstwhile comrades and erstwhile prey, have meted out to make them now sound so compassionate about the lunatic?

'Oh. Well, that's good. I take it he's dead?'

The pained expression on François face deepened and Gilles could almost imagine that tears glinted beneath the craggy overhang of the elder's brow.

'How did the village execute him?' the knight asked gently, choosing his words now with the care of a surgeon choosing his instruments. *A village execution.* How clean that sounded. How impersonal.

François, however, had obviously being pushed beyond the niceties of not just diplomacy but even common sense. With a sudden start he wheeled on the knight, the fury in his eyes no longer hidden.

'Nobody executed him,' the elder hissed, lips drawn back in a snarl as he pronounced the word. 'He was murdered, horribly murdered, just like all the rest.'

The sudden vehemence of his words sent Sir Gilles stepping backwards into a defensive stance. His hand fell to the hilt of his sword before he realised what he was doing. He dropped his empty fist guiltily, but it was too late. François had already seen the gesture. He laughed bitterly.

'Oh yes, the protection of your knightly virtues,' he sneered mockingly, pulling himself to his feet and lurching towards the armoured man who towered above him. One of the lads who had been loading the cart appeared at his elbow to offer a supporting hand. The elder shook him off angrily as he stalked towards Sir Gilles.

'The only difference you've made is to double the number of this cursed thing's kills,' he said, the anger in his voice twisting into an accusation. Once more the youth, with a terrified glance at the knight, grabbed the elder's arm and tried to pull him away. Once more the old man shook the anxious hand off, this time turning his ire on the youngster who hovered nervously at his grandfather's side.

'Get away. What's the great knight going to do? Kill me? Ha!' He spat a gob of contemptuous phlegm onto the ground an inch away from Sir Gilles's boots, then turned away with a grunt of disgust.

Claude had watched his master flush beneath the old peasant's tirade, the vitriolic fusion of shame and rage burning on his cheeks. Now, as the villagers went on with their wary preparations, Claude saw the colour drain away from Sir Gilles's face, leaving him pale and shaking with emotion. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, that might be of comfort to the stricken young knight. But before he could think of a single thing to say it was too late.

The muscles in Sir Gilles's jaw bulged with sudden determination and he strode forward after François. The old man's hunched back was still turned towards his guest. He must have seen something reflected in his grandson's widening eyes, though, for he turned when the knight had approached to within a dozen paces.

Claude saw the rigid mask of defiance still etched across the elder's features. There would be no apology, of that he was sure, no more bowing. And behind the stubborn old fool a dozen of his sons and grandsons had noticed events unfolding.

As the steel giant closed in on their ancestor they fumbled for knives, hoes and pitchforks. In their shaking hands and round eyes Claude saw the same desperate courage that will drive a ewe to attack the wolf pack that has cornered her lambs. He felt his heart plummet at the tragedy he knew was about to unfold.

Sir Gilles, reaching out one gauntleted hand towards the old man, seemed oblivious to all this. His whole attention was focused on the elder. As the mailed fist fell towards him his only response was the small straightening of posture that was all an aged skeleton would allow. The first of the villagers lowered his pitchfork and started forward. Claude, mind frozen by the speed of events, wished futilely that what was going to happen wouldn't.

Then the metalled talon of Sir Gilles's hand swept past his host's neck and landed gently upon his shoulder. Bowing down to peer into the astonished elder's eyes the knight said: 'I am truly sorry to have so failed you. I am sorry that you are frightened enough to leave your village. I have failed in my duty to the Lady and to you, her people. My father would not have failed. Nor would my brother, Leon. But I have and I have no excuse.'

Suspicion chased astonishment off François's wizened features. By the time the knight had finished his apology the sincerity of the words had melted away even that.

'No, no, lord. I should apologise to you,' he replied warily, voice softened now with grudging compassion. 'I had no call to blame you. Since the black hail fell on these hills in my grandfather's day much has happened here, much that has proved beyond man's power to change.'

'Yet I would be more than a man,' Sir Gilles smiled bitterly. 'And perhaps I still can be. All I ask is that you give me one more night. Give me one more chance to find the monster that would prey upon the Lady's people.'

François hesitated for barely a moment before giving the shallowest of nods and turning to address his flock.

'We'll leave tomorrow,' he told them. Then, with a stiff bow towards Sir Gilles, he turned and hobbled back into his hut. The knight returned the bow and walked stiffly back to his horse.

'What will we do now, sire?' Claude asked, hurrying to catch up.

'I go to beg for the Lady's aid. There was a pool a little way into the woods we rode through this morning. It seemed like a goodly place.'

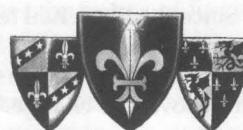
'And will I come with you?'

'No, you'll stay here. I want you to organise these people into three regiments and make sure they stay in them. I leave you in charge of the details.'

'Yes, sire, of course.' Claude bowed subserviently whilst his master climbed back into the saddle and cantered back out of the village. He waited until Sir Gilles was out of sight before crossing to François's hut. He ducked below the heavy oaken lintel of the door and instructed the elder.

'I want you to organise your people into three groups,' he told the old man urgently. 'All of them are to carry their weapons at all times. None of them are to leave their groups for any reason. Any that break these rules are to be fined half of their wealth. Do you understand?'

As soon as François had grumbled his assent Claude took his leave and went to fetch his horse. He had carried out his orders. Now he would go to watch his knight's back, as was proper for an equerry. There was nothing underhanded about that, he thought, as he carefully scanned the horizon. Nothing underhanded at all.



SIR GILLES was not difficult to follow, especially to one as skilled at reading the land as Claude. He had followed the path of crushed moss and snapped

twigs through the forest just as easily as he had followed the great crescents of the charger's hoofs through the mud of the road.

He had tethered his own mount some way back and continued stealthily on foot beneath the great damp overhangs of beech and birch and twisted ancient oak. The undergrowth was thick here, heavy with moisture and dying brown leaves. As Claude pushed through it his nose wrinkled at the acrid smell of decay. In most parts of Bretonnia, he reflected, such a bulk of vegetation would have been cropped back by deer or boar, but here it seemed untouched.

And come to think of it the forest did seem strangely quiet, almost as if it had been cleared of life by something, perhaps even something that left human bite marks in the raw flesh of its prey. The thought sent a sliver of ice down the old man's spine and he found himself walking faster.

'Don't be such an old woman,' he scolded himself, consciously slowing his pace. 'A small wood in a small valley is easily over-hunted. There's nought more mysterious here than greedy peasants.'

Even so he was more than a little relieved when he finally reached Sir Gilles. Only the fact that the knight was so obviously immersed in prayer stilled the cry of greeting that rose to his retainer's lips.

Sir Gilles knelt silently before a wide pool, his attention lost in its cool depths.

Overarching trees shone and glimmered in the calm surface, one world reflected by another, and around the banks rushes swayed gently to some ancient and inaudible rhythm.

Claude sank to his haunches at the edge of the clearing, lulled by the peace of the scene. The only real movement was the light fall of autumn browned leaves. He watched one as it spiralled down onto the placid mirror of the water and began to float away, pulled by some invisible current.

Leaning back against the bole of a willow, the old man half-closed his eyes. In his imagination the leaf became a ship, bound for distant Cathay or even mythical

Lustria. The stem became a mast, the withered edges the gunwales. And when the first splash of water sent thick ripples rolling towards the little craft he saw only waves riding before a storm.

A moment later he began to wonder what had caused such a disturbance in the water. Surely this pool was too isolated to contain trout to rise and leap. He looked up with a frown. For a moment he saw nothing but the enveloping mass of trees and shadows that encircled them, and the stooped form of his master's back.

Then he saw her and his heart leapt.

It was Her, there could be no doubt of that. How many times had he seen her form, revered in stone or glass or on paper? How many times had men whispered of her in the depths of the night or called upon her in the midst of battle? He'd even met her before in dreams and amongst the labyrinths of his imagination and felt her presence, a comforting hand in the depths of hardship or a playful ripple of light on the water.

Yes, it was her. As she glided through the pool Claude's eyes caressed the skin that glowed paler and more precious than Araby pearl. Her hair cascaded down onto her shoulders, framing a face both girlish and ancient, wise and forgiving. And her eyes! How they sparkled and shone with a healing warmth of green fire.

Claude felt a moment's dizziness and realised that he had been holding his breath. He managed to tear his eyes away from the Lady for long enough to glance at Sir Gilles.

The knight still sat slumped in prayer, lips moving silently even as his goddess approached. The light gossamer of her dresses flowed around her, shining with a ghostly luminescence against the dark backdrop of rotten forest. For a moment Claude considered calling out to his master, of heralding her approach, but somehow he lacked the courage. In the presence of such divine beauty he felt too unworthy to speak. Instead he gazed upon her and let every detail of her magnificence burn itself into his memory.

She had almost reached Sir Gilles before he looked up. He rose to his feet, then started as though stung. The Lady smiled at his astonishment, a beatific expression of love and compassion speeding slowly across her face, and he sank back down to his knees.

'My Lady...' he whispered as she approached, arms opening and hands outstretched in benediction. Sir Gilles, head bowed, watched her glide through the last few feet of water and step onto the bank. He saw the water dripping from the hem of her dress, the white of it now speckled with the green of pond weed.

'My Lady...' he repeated breathlessly as she laid a perfect hand on his shoulder and stooped down to brush cold lips across his brow. She smiled again, revealing teeth as white and hard as bones and lowered her lips to kiss his neck.

'My Lady!' he said a third time, his voice suddenly full of fire as he sprang backwards. With an evil hiss of steel against leather, his sword was free of its scabbard, the burnished metal of the blade dull despite the divine light that surrounded the goddess. Then, before the enormity of the knight's actions could penetrate through Claude's shock, he watched his master slice his sword backhanded across the smooth, cream-coloured flesh of her neck.

It was a killing stroke. The blade spat out a bright plume of blood as it sawed effortlessly through the cords and tendons of her neck, almost decapitating her where she stood.

Claude watched as she crumpled backwards into the mud and filth of the forest floor. After a moment he walked numbly over to where the body lay and gazed down stonily at the ruined flesh that had once lived, once breathed... had once been a goddess. Now it was no more than meat cooling on the forest floor.

And bad meat at that. He watched as the flowing silk of its hair withered and died, shrinking back into a malformed skull. Already the supple grace of her frame had collapsed into something ruined and hunched, the skeleton twisted out of shape by who knew what dark sorcery?

Claude shivered and hugged himself as the fair pigment of her skin darkened and mottled, turning into a sickly grey leather before his very eyes. Even worse was the thing's face. How could those evil and wizened features have resembled anything even the least bit fair? Only the colour of the eyes remained unchanged, but the green now seemed rotten and cancerous and so very cold.

He remembered the expression she had worn. He remembered how beautiful it had been, how *alluring*. Suddenly, for the first time since the brooding of his first battle, Claude's stomach clenched itself into a fist that doubled him up with nausea. With hardly a backwards glance he stumbled away into the undergrowth, leaving Sir Gilles still standing pale and trembling over his foe.



THE NEXT MORNING they crested the pass above Celliers for the last time. Below them the valley was laid out like a map. Claude turned in his saddle to take a last look at the village, the forest, the smoke from the great bonfire upon which the beast's body had been burned so gleefully the night before.

Where had it come from, he wondered for the dozenth, the hundredth time. Had it been made, or born, or ensorcelled by Chaos? And how long had it lived here, silently haunting the edges and dark places of this land before hunger drove it in to the village and the addictive taste of man-flesh?

Claude found his gaze shifting from the valley floor to the distant rock spires that were the heart of the Massif Orcal. Beyond them, peering from between the granite peaks, towering clouds waited blue and heavy with the year's first snow.

The old retainer shivered and thankfully turned his back on them. By the time they caught up with him he would be back beside the great fireplace of Castle Mordeaux, a horn of spiced wine steaming in his hand.

Only one thing still bothered him. It hung in a leather bag from Sir Gilles's saddle, a diminutive, evil smelling lump that still sweated a disgusting grey slime. It had no scales, this head, no savage teeth or needle-sharp fangs. Its jaws were weak, lacking even the knots of muscle any man might boast. In fact when it had been cleaned the thing would be scarcely bigger than two clenched fists.

'Well, sire,' Claude began, knowing that he would have to broach the subject before they went much further. 'I'm sure we'll be able to pick up that boulder of an orc's head tomorrow afternoon. I lashed it to a lone pine tree for the birds to clean. It should look good mounted in the great hall, don't you think?'

'What do you mean?' the knight asked, turning in his saddle to regard his servant. 'I have my trophy here.'

'Yes, of course. Your real trophy. But for the family gibbet...'

'This is for the family gibbet. This thing is the beast that tested my faith to the utmost. It is this that will hang amongst the rest of my family's great trophies.'

Claude, sensing the strength of purpose that lay behind his master's words, sighed as he realised it would be pointless to continue.

'How... how could you be so sure that thing wasn't the Lady?' he dared to ask, changing the subject.

Sir Gilles smiled wistfully for a moment before he replied.

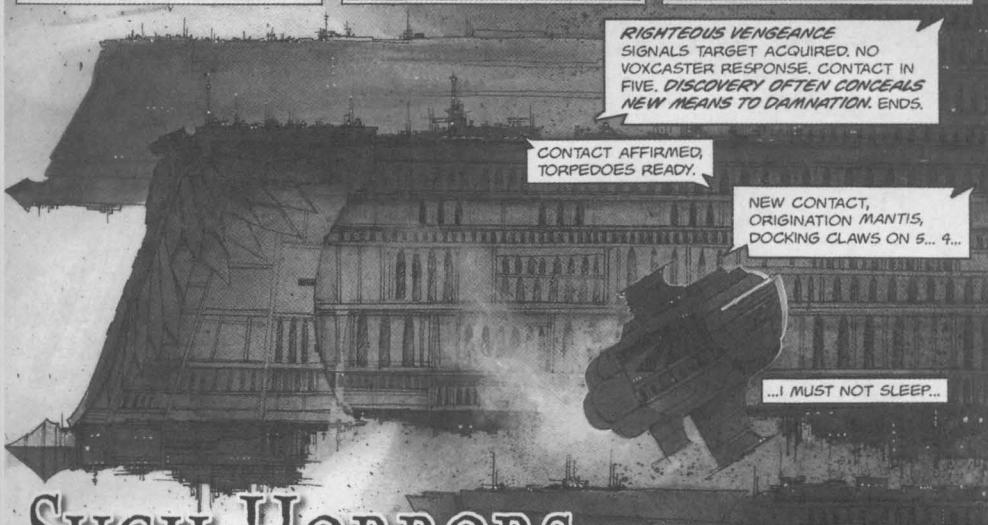
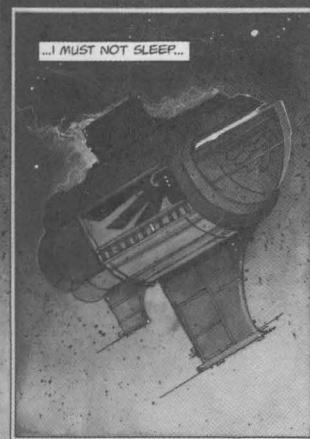
'The eyes,' he said at length. 'In the old tales she is always dark, a real Bretonnian woman. Brown hair. Brown eyes.'

'Tales, yes.' Claude nodded. 'But when your brother saw her she had green eyes. As green as your mother's, he said.'

'Yes,' Sir Gilles nodded, 'I know.' Then, for no apparent reason, he began to laugh until his sides shook and tears glinted in his eyes.

Claude lapsed back into silence and shook his head.

Knights! He would never understand them. *



SUCH HORRORS

SCRIPT Andy Jones :: ART Wayne England :: LETTERS Fiona Stephenson



I ADVISE CAUTION, COMMANDER BRANTER. THE TARGET IS UNKNOWN. OUR FUSION BEAMERS COULD SUBSTANTIALLY... REDUCE IT.

CAPTAIN STALGRUMME, SHUTTLE INVESTIGATED, SIR. ONE SURVIVOR.

DO NOT TALK TO ME OF CAUTION! THIS BATTLE WILL BE WON BY THE BRAVERY OF MY ULTRAMARINES, NOT BY LONG RANGE ENERGY WEAPONS. EMPEROR BE PRAISED!

YES! NO SLEEP! ALL DEAD! BUTCHERED! CONSUMED!

I HAVE NO TIME FOR RIDDLES! STATE YOUR NAME AND MISSION.

MISSION?... AH... DARIUS, ILLUMINATOR PRIME, SURVEY VESSEL MANTIS, DO NOT MAKE ME SLEEP, LORD!

OUR MISSION WAS TO EXPLORE AND CHART THE TALON SECTOR. SUCH HORRORS! ALL RECORDED IN MY BOOK!

READ IT, CAPTAIN, READ IT!

VERY WELL, I GIVE YOU FIVE MINUTES OF MY TIME. BE GRATEFUL.

FIVE MINUTES? FIVE MINUTES! OUR DOOM IS UPON US! WE HANG BY A THREAD...







READY
THE TORPEDOES!
BROADCAST THE
LITANIES.

VERY WELL,
COMMANDER.

YOU'RE MAD!
SEE MY BOOK! DO NOT
SLEEP! WE MUST
RETURN! WE MUST
WARN--

SILENCE,
DOG! EMBRACE
THIS OPPORTUNITY TO
HONOUR YOUR FALLEN
COMRADES.

BRING THE
HERETIC WITH US.
WE WILL NEED A
GUIDE.

MOOOOOOOOOOO!

IDENTILOCUTOR
CONFIRMED: MANTIS
IN RANGE, ON SCREEN
IN 30.

'BOARDING CRAFT
PRIMED. FAITH SUSTAINS.'

ULTRAMARINES!
BOARD THE
TORPEDOES - WE
GO TO WAR!

END

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WHO MOURNS A NECROMANCER?

BY Brian Craig

THE FUNERAL CART made its slow and steady way up the hill towards the Colaincourt Cemetery. The day was grey and overcast, and a cold wind blew from the east. The man who drove the cart and the companion who sat beside him both bore sullen scowls upon their faces, and the two dappled black mares which pulled it held their heads very low, as if they too had lost all enthusiasm for the work which was their lot. Behind the cart walked a solitary mourner, incongruous in his isolation.

The lone mourner was Alpheus Kalispera, High Priest of Verena and Magister of the University of Gisoreux. When he went about his normal business he commanded respect and was treated with due deference, but in his present role he drew hostile glances from all those who watched the cart go by. There were not many; although Lanfranc Chazal had been an important and well-respected man in his prime that prime was now long past, and Chazal's reputation had been badly tarnished in his later years.

Kalispera walked rather painfully; he was old and his joints were very stiff. He kept his hands carefully within the folds of his cloak, for the cold made his gnarled fingers ache terribly.

When the cemetery gates finally came into sight a company of small boys ran from one of the side-streets, hurling mud and stones at the coffin which rested on the cart, crying: 'Necromancer! Necromancer!'

Kalispera rounded on them, and would have spoken angrily, but they hared away as fast as their thin legs would carry them. To abuse an alleged necromancer was to them an act of great daring, even if the man be dead in his coffin, unable to answer the charge in any way at all.

A sallow-faced priest of Morr waited by a freshly-dug grave, quite alone. Even the sexton had taken care to absent himself from the ceremony of interment. Kalispera frowned – there should have been two priests, at least. He had been here many times before to see officers of the University laid to rest, and had been witness to occasions when scholars of far less status had been laid to rest by three officiating priests, attended by half a hundred mourners.

The magister took up a position opposite the priest, who stared at him while the two carriers manhandled the coffin down from the death-cart on to the ropes, then lowered it with indecent haste into the pit which had been made ready for it. It was all too obvious from the man's manner that the priest was here under protest, bound by the vows he had taken – which would not let him refuse to conduct a funeral service if he were so instructed. Kalispera felt the man's stare upon him, full of hostility, but he would not bow his head yet. Instead, he met the gaze as steadily as he could.

The priest took objection to this refusal to be ashamed. 'Who mourns a necromancer?' he asked bitterly. 'It would be best if I were left to do this sorry task alone.'

'I was his friend,' Kalispera said evenly. 'I have known him since childhood.'

'Such a man forsakes all claims of friendship and amity when he delves into forbidden lore,' the priest answered him. 'This man has sought to deal unnaturally with the dead, and should be shunned by the living – especially those who deem themselves priests of Verena.'

'He himself has joined the ranks of the dead now,' Kalispera observed, refusing to be stung by the insult. 'He is but a memory to the living and, of all the memories which

I have of him, by far the greater number are happy ones. I have come to say farewell to a man I have known all my life, and I will not permit the fact that he has lately been abused by foolish and malicious men to prevent me from doing so.'

'But you have come alone,' the priest replied sourly, gesturing about him. 'It seems that all the others who knew him when they were young have a keener sense of duty to the cause of righteousness.'

Kalispera could not help but look around, though he did not expect to see any others hurrying to the place. He sighed, but very quietly, for he did not want the priest of Morr to know how disappointed he was. All but a few of the magisters of the university had known Lanfranc Chazal for many years, and had liked him well enough before the evil rumours had taken wing like a flock of Morr's dark ravens. He had thought that a few might be prepared to set aside the vilifications and accusations, for the sake of remembrance of better times. But the university was, as ever, a fever-pit of jealousies and intrigues, in which reputations were considered very precious things, not to be risked on such a chance as this.

Kalispera felt a moment of paradoxical gratitude for the fact that he was old and far beyond the calls of ambition. It was all too probable that the next Magister of Gisoreux to ride up the hill on the creaking death-cart would be himself.

'Please proceed,' he said to the priest. 'You will be glad to get it over, I know.'

The priest frowned again, but consented to let the magister have the last word. Sonorously, he began to intone the funeral rite, consigning the body of unlucky Lanfranc Chazal to the care of his stern master.

But Morr's officer was barely half way through the ceremony when there was a sudden clatter of hooves in the gateway of the cemetery, and though propriety demanded that neither of them should look up, both priest and magister glanced sideways with astonishment.

A huge bay, liberally flecked with sweat, was reined in not thirty feet from the grave. A man leapt down, patting the trembling horse upon the neck to offer thanks for its

unusual effort – it was obvious that it had ridden far and fast. The newcomer was a man in his late twenties, plainly dressed, without livery or ornament – but he strode to the graveside with the pride and grace of an aristocrat. He favoured the priest with a single glance of haughty disapproval, but looked at Kalispera longer and far more respectfully. In fact, he nodded to the magister as if he knew him and expected to be recognised in turn, but Kalispera could not immediately put a name to the face.

Who mourns a necromancer? Kalispera thought, echoing the priest's words with a hint of ironic triumph. Two men at least, it seems, are not so cowardly that they dare not show their faces here. I thank you, young sir, with all my heart.

Before he bowed his head again, he favoured the younger man with a discreet smile. The priest of Morr saw, and disapproved, but there was nothing he could do save to resume the ceremony with all due expedition.

As soon as it was all finished, though, the priest graced the newcomer with a scowl more hateful than any he had previously contrived. Then he hurried off, leaving the grave gaping like a fresh wound in the green hillside.



THE SEXTON, who must have been almost as old as Alpheus Kalispera, and every bit as feeble in wind and limb, shuffled from his hiding-place to begin the work of filling in the grave.

The need for a respectfully bowed head now gone, Kalispera looked long and hard at the second mourner – and suddenly found the name which had momentarily eluded him. 'Cesar Barbier! As I live and breathe!' he said.

Barbier smiled, but thinly, as though he had not the heart for a proper greeting. 'Aye, Magister Kalispera,' he said. 'You did well to remember me at all, for it's a fair while since I was a student here – and I have not been in Gisoreux for some years,

though I have not been far away.'

'In Oisillon, perhaps?' Kalispera said. 'I remember that we thought you destined to be a luminary of King Charles's court.'

Now the magister had the name, the rest was not too hard to remember. The Barbiers were one of the great families of the region, more celebrated for breeding soldiers than scholars. But Cesar had been a clever student, more attentive than many to what his teachers had to tell him. Young men of his class came to the university primarily to sow their wild oats at a safe distance from home, and in truth Barbier had certainly done his share of that, but his interests had eventually extended at least a little beyond wine, women and the dance.

Barbier shook his head. 'I have been in Rondeau,' he said, naming a small town some miles to the south of the great city. Kalispera frowned, trying to remember whether Rondeau was part of the Barbier estate – and, for that matter, whether Cesar had yet succeeded to his father's title. A good Bretonnian was supposed to know such things, even if he were a high priest of Verena and a magister of the university, devoted by vocation to more permanent kinds of wisdom. Cesar Barbier certainly did not look like an established nobleman, for he wore no powder and no wig, and his clothes were honest leather – but if he had come to Gisoreux on horseback he might easily have consigned his finery to a saddlebag.

'I am glad to see you here, my lord,' Kalispera said guardedly. He dared not ask whether Barbier had really come to Gisoreux simply to attend the funeral – or, if so, why.

Barbier gave another slight smile when he heard the magister call him 'my lord' – an appellation to which custom had not entitled him while he was a student. 'And I am glad to see you, sir,' he replied in turn, 'though I must confess to a little disappointment that I find you alone. I came as soon as I heard that Magister Chazal had died, but I fear that the news had made slow progress in arriving at Rondeau. Still, it seems that I came in time.'

As he spoke he looked at the ancient sexton, who was shovelling earth as fast as he possibly could, clearly no more anxious than any other to be too long in the company of a corpse of such evil repute.

'Aye,' Kalispera said, 'you came in time. But I doubt that you would have come at all, had rumour of Lanfranc's last years reached Rondeau before the news of his death. I am alone because no other would come. It has been rumoured of late that my friend was... was a necromancer, and I dare say that you know as well as any other what damage such rumours can do. I am glad to see you, as I said – but perhaps I should rather be sorry that you have taken the trouble, if you came in ignorance.'

'I did not come in ignorance, I assure you,' Barbier said solemnly. 'I came because I knew, far better than any other, what kind of man he really was.'

Kalispera felt tears rising to his eyes, and he bowed his head.

'Thank you for that,' he said.

'Oh no,' replied the other, reaching out to take the older and frailer man by the arm. 'It is for me to thank you on his behalf – for you stood by him when no one else would.'

They stood together, silently, for two or three minutes more. When the sexton was finished, Barbier gave him a suitable coin, which the old man accepted without any word or gesture of thanks.

'Is there somewhere we can go?' the young nobleman asked gently. 'I think we both stand in need of the warmth of a fire and a cup of good wine.'

'Of course,' Kalispera said quietly. 'I would be most honoured if you would be my guest, and would share with me in the remembrance of my friend.'

'I will do it gladly,' Barbier assured him. The two went down the hill together, quite oblivious to any inquisitive eyes which may have stared after them.



ALPHEUS KALISPERA took Cesar Barbier to the room where he worked and taught. The sun had set by the time they arrived there, but the autumn twilight always lingered in the room, because its latticed window faced the south-west. Kalispera had always found it to be a good room for reading – and an excellent place for deeper contemplation.

At Barbier's request, Kalispera told him about the shadow which had been cast over Lanfranc Chazal during the last years of his tenure at the university.

'No charge was brought against him in any court, sacred or secular,' he was at pains to explain. 'He was condemned exclusively by scurrilous gossip and clandestine vilification. I have even heard it said that his death was a manifestation of the wrath of Verena, delayed for so long only because Verena was a calm and patient deity who loved her followers of wisdom just a little too well. That was terrible, truly terrible.'

'Alas for poor Lanfranc, he had the misfortune to age less gracefully than he might, and he came to suffer from a certain disfiguration of the features which his enemies took to be evident proof of his dabbling with forbidden knowledge. One expects to hear such folderol from common peasants, of course, but I had thought better of Gisoreux and the university. If the men who call themselves the wisest in the world can so easily fall prey to such silly suspicions, what hope is there for the future of reason?'

'Long before he was consigned to the grave where we saw him laid today, Lanfranc had begun to take on the appearance of a dead man, with whitened skin and sunken eyes. I tried in vain to persuade our colleagues that it was merely an illness of old age, with no dire implication, but my ideas on the subject had always been considered unorthodox, and no one would listen to me. Even his friends were content to accept his disfigurement as evidence of a secret interest in the practice of necromancy. "All illness comes from the gods," they said, "and is sent to educate us." Lanfranc Chazal never believed any such thing, and neither do I, for we had seen too many sick men and women in our time. Alas, we were the only two remaining

who remembered the great plague of forty years since, and how dreadfully it used the magisters of the day. Now there is only me.'

Kalispera realized that his tone had become very bitter, and stopped in embarrassment. The twilight had faded while he spoke and the room was now as gloomy as his mood, so he covered his embarrassment by looking about for the tinderbox in order that he might light a candle. He had mislaid it, and was forced to get up in order to conduct a scrupulous search.

Cesar Barbier did not say anything to him while he searched for the box, found it, and struck a light. But when the candle finally flared up, he saw that the younger man was watching him very quizzically from his place by the fireside.

Kalispera resumed his own seat, then smoothed his white beard with his right hand as if to settle himself completely. 'You are probably astonished to hear all this,' he said.

'On the contrary,' Barbier replied with a guarded look. 'There is nothing in it which is news to me, but I am glad to hear your account of it. He would have been very pleased and proud to know that his truest friend did not desert him, even at the end.'

'You knew!' Kalispera exclaimed. 'But you said that you have not been in Gisoreux for some time. How could you know about Lanfranc's illness, the changes in his appearance?'

'He visited me in Rondeau,' the young nobleman said. 'We have seen one another frequently over the years. I always regarded him as my mentor – he was ever the man to whom I turned for advice and help, and he never failed me. He told me more than once how grateful he was for your amity, and I know that it weighed upon his conscience that his claim upon your good opinion was not as honest as he would have wished.'

Alpheus Kalispera started in his seat and his eyes grew suddenly wide. 'What are you saying?' he cried, angrily. 'Do you mean to insult my grief?'

Barbier sat upright as well, but then leaned forward to reach out a soothing hand. 'No, magister!' he said. 'Anything but! Lanfranc Chazal was the best and noblest man I ever knew. I came here to

share my grief, not to insult yours.'

Kalispera stared at him angrily for a moment, but then relaxed with a sigh. 'I do not know what you mean,' he said. 'Lanfranc said nothing to me about visiting you in Rondeau – nothing at all. And I cannot believe that he deceived me, even in a matter as small as that.'

'Alas, sir,' Barbier said, 'he *did* deceive you, even in matters much weightier. I can assure you, though, that it was not because he doubted you that he kept his darkest secrets from you, but only because he doubted *himself*.'

There was a long moment's silence before Kalispera said in a horrified whisper, 'Do you mean to tell me that Lanfranc Chazal *was* a necromancer, after all – and that you were party to his experiments?'

'That is what I mean to tell you,' the other confirmed, in a low voice. 'But I beg you not to condemn me – and certainly not to condemn Magister Chazal – until you have heard me out.'

Alpheus Kalispera felt that the features of his face were firmly set in a mask of pain, and that his heart was unnaturally heavy in his breast. Nevertheless, he made every effort to speak boldly. 'Explain yourself, my lord,' he said. Despite the title, it was the patronising command of the instructor, not the humble request of the commoner.

'I intend to explain, magister,' said the young man, quietly, 'and I beg you to forgive my clumsiness in going about it. You will remember, I am sure, that I was not the best of students. I was, after all, one of those sent by a pretentious father to acquire the merest veneer of culture and learning, not one intended to learn the skills of a scrivener or the training of a priest. I was something of a noble fool in my early days, and although Magister Chazal taught me in the end to be less of a fool than I was, still my wisdom is of a very narrow kind. Let me tell you my story in my own way, so that we may mourn together the passing of a great and generous man.'

Kalispera had to admit that this was a pretty speech, and he believed that he could hear within its phrases the influence of his friend Lanfranc Chazal. But there was another thought echoing its derision inside his head: *Who mourns a necromancer?*

Could it be, he wondered, that the world had been right after all, and he the lone fool?

'I am sorry, my lord,' he said, however, with honest but troubled humility. 'Please say what you have come to say. I will listen patiently.'

'Thank you, sir,' Cesar Barbier said, relaxing again in his turn. He paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts, and then he proceeded to tell his story.



YOU KNOW my name,' Barbier began, 'and I assume that you know whose son I am. Perhaps you remember my father from his own student days, when I am sure he impressed you with his command of those aristocratic virtues befitting a man whose service to our king has been of the military kind. He is now as he undoubtedly was then: bold in word and deed, with a will and stomach of iron. Neither wine nor passion has the power to disturb his firmness of mind, and I dare say that you found his head quite impregnable to wisdom or sophistication.

'When I first became a student here I set out to do my best to be like my father, and I think that for a while I succeeded well enough to convince almost everyone that I was a perfect example of that kind, save only for Magister Chazal. He saw through my facade of reckless intolerance to the, well, the gentler soul within. He knew what a creature of dishonesty I was, and helped me to use my years here to become a better man.'

'In public he never gave evidence by word or gesture that he knew what a poseur I was, but in private he talked to me in a different way. He taught me to trust him, and be honest in what I said to him. With him and him alone I was my true self: full of doubt, full of passion, and tender of sentiment – all traits which my father despised, and despises still. Magister Chazal never advised me to break down my public pretence, but was content to give me an opportunity to lay it aside. I cannot tell you how much it meant to me to have that relief.'

'When the time came for me to leave Gisoreux and take up the business of accepting the responsibilities of my position, I quickly began to use the gift of lettering — which was one of the valuable things which I had learned within these walls — in the writing of letters to Magister Chazal. I was his guest here in Gisoreux on numerous occasions. He was the one and only person to whom I confided my true feelings, and by degrees I won *his* confidence too, so that he began to say to me those things which he dared not say to people of his own kind.'

'It was from Magister Chazal that I learned about *your* beliefs, Magister Kalispera. He told me that you had drawn conclusions about the nature of disease which were, if not openly heretical, at least unorthodox. He told me about your sceptical attitude to the medicines and treatments established by custom. He told me too about your insistence that disease and suffering make no discrimination between the guilty and the innocent, and are far less often the result of magic or divine intervention than we are prone to believe. He respected you for holding those beliefs, and for setting what you believed to be the truth over the advantages to be gained by conformity. He thought that you might respect his own opinions, but hesitated to burden you with any more unorthodoxy than you had already accepted.'

Alpheus Kalispera had begun to see where this account was leading, but he kept silent while Barbier paused, and looked at him very gravely.

'It is the common belief,' the younger man continued, 'that any magic but the pettiest is inherently good or evil. Any magic which involves trafficking with the dead or the undead is held to be supremely wicked. Magister Chazal was prepared to doubt that. His view was that although any knowledge might be used for evil ends by evil men, knowledge as such is always good. Ignorance, he used to say, is the greatest evil of all.'

Kalispera nodded his head then, for he had certainly heard Chazal say *that* on many an occasion.

'For that reason,' Barbier went on, 'Magister Chazal had studied the arcane language of necromancy and had read books written in that language. His intention in so doing was not to become a master of necromantic magic, but to learn more about the mysteries of death — to enhance his understanding. He was not a man to play with the conjuration of ghosts or the reanimation of corpses; for him, the written word was enough. He valued enlightenment far more than power.'

'The story of these researches he confided to me by degrees, over a period of more than a year. In return, I talked to him about my own very different problems, which arose from friction between myself and my father as to the managements of our estates and our lives.'

'I found myself in disagreement with my father on many matters of principle — on the matter of the unhappiness which he caused my mother and my sisters, for instance, and on the matter of the relentless tyranny which he exerted over his tenants and his bondsmen. But I could not successfully oppose him because I was still forced by convention and circumstance to pretend to be like him. I had begun to hate my father, and in so doing had begun to hate myself too, for being so obviously his son.'

'Then, quite out of the blue, disaster struck me. I fell in love.'

'Love was not a factor in my father's calculations of advantage, and he had already contracted marriages for my two sisters on the basis of his commercial interests. It would have been bad enough had I fallen in love with a woman of my own class, had it not been the one which he considered most useful to the family interest, but in fact I fell in love with a commoner, who was very beautiful but of no account whatsoever in my father's scheme of things.'

'To my father, the very idea of love is bizarre. He has not an atom of affection in his being. I, by virtue of some silly jest of the gods who determine such things, am very differently made, and my honest passion for the girl — whose name was Siri — was quite boundless. I could not envision life without her, and life itself came to depend in my estimation upon my possession of her.'

By possession I do not mean mere physical possession – my father would have raised no word of objection had I been able simply to use and then discard the girl – but authentic union. That, of course, my father would never tolerate, and yet it was what I had to have.

'When I said all this to Magister Chazal, he did not presume to tell me what to do, but he gave me every assistance in dissolving my confusion and seeing clearly what kind of choice I had to make. He helped me to understand that the time had come when I must either break completely with my father or utterly destroy the secret self which I had so carefully preserved for many years. I could not cut out and burn my own heart. And so I eloped and married Siri in secret, resolving never to see my father again.'

I anticipated that my father would disown me and forbid my name ever to be mentioned again in his house or his estates. That was what I expected, and was prepared to accept. But I had underestimated him. Perhaps it would have been different had he had another heir to put in my place, but I had no brother and nor had he. He could not face the thought of allowing his lands and his titles to become subservient to another name in being diverted to one of my sisters.

'He sent his servants to search me out, and then to bring me home by force, my... my young wife with me.'



CESAR BARBIER paused again in his account – but not, this time, to measure the attitude of his listener. Until now he had been quite calm and very scrupulous in his speech, as befitted a nobleman of Bretonnia, but now his breathing was clotted by emotion, and there were tears in his eyes: tears of anguish, and of rage.

When it seemed that the young noble could not go on, Alpheus Kalispera said, very quietly: 'He had her killed?'

'*Had her killed?*' answered Barbier, as though the words had been forced out of him with a hot iron. 'Oh no, he did not *have* her killed! You do not know what manner of man my father is! He killed her with his own hands, while his servants forced me to watch.'

'He destroyed her, and the unborn child she carried within her, without any trace of feeling – not because he hated her, but simply because she stood in the way of his calculations. He felt no guilt, nor any fear of retribution. Had she killed him it would have been a fearful crime, for which she would have been burned alive as a petty traitor, but for him to kill her was merely a matter of business, for her father was his bondsman, and she an item of inconvenient property. I saw her die, Magister Kalispera – *I saw her die!*'

Kalispera did not know what to say. He could not imagine that Lanfranc Chazal had known what to say, when the poor man had run to him with the same dreadful tale, four or five years earlier.

'I wanted to kill him,' Cesar Barbier said, when he was capable of continuing his tale. 'And the folly of it all is that if I had been what he wanted me to be, I *would* have killed him. With a sword or a cudgel or a poisoned cup I would have snuffed out his vile existence, and sent our title to oblivion by surrendering myself to the law and going gladly to the gallows. If his way had been the right way, I would have taken my revenge, and happily so.'

'Perhaps I would have done it, had it not been for Magister Chazal – for he it was who persuaded me that I must not waste my own being in destroying my father's, on the two accounts that it would be both futile and false to my own true nature. He implored me to find a better way – and in my turn, I implored him to show me one.'

Kalispera drew in his breath, deeply and painfully. It was all too obvious to him what the result of this mutual imploring must have been. Barbier saw that he had guessed.

'Will you tell me that it was unlawful?' said the young man angrily. 'Will you tell me that it was lawful and just for my father to murder my wife and unborn child because they did not suit him, and a horrid crime to undo the act, as far it could be

undone? Will you tell me that Magister Chazal was evil, and my father's soul quite stainless? Tell me then, Magister Kalispera. Tell me, in so many words, where the right of it lies.'

Kalispera shook his head. The darkness in the corners of the room seemed to close in around them. 'Tell me,' he said in a steely voice, 'what it was that Lanfranc did, and what its consequence has been.'

'I had not dared to bring the body of my wife into the precincts of the university,' Barbier said, 'nor even through the gates of Gisoreux. I had taken her instead to the house in Rondeau which I had bought, intending that we should live there when we returned from the Empire — for we did not expect to spend our whole lives in exile from our homeland. Magister Chazal accompanied me there and begun his work.'

'He had told me that he could not bring my Siri back to life, for if such a thing could be done at all it was beyond his skill. He could not restore her flesh to me, but her spirit was a different matter; he believed that he had knowledge enough to bring back her ghost from the realm of the dead, and protect it from the dissolution which ordinarily overtakes such beings.'

'Spectres, he told me, are often bound to our world in consequence of curses, doomed to haunt the spot where they died. What he intended to do was to summon Siri as a ghost, and ask her whether she would be bound of her own free will, not to the place where she had died but to the place where she had hoped to live. If she consented, he said, then he would try to bind her to the house in Rondeau.'

'He was not sure that he had knowledge enough to accomplish more, but he promised that he would try firstly to give her a voice that she might speak to me, and secondly to allow her to take on at intervals a certain frail substance which would allow us to touch. For this latter purpose he required to combine together something of her substance and something of mine, and I allowed him to remove from my left hand that finger upon which I had placed my wedding ring.'

Barbier held up his left hand, and Kalispera saw for the first time that the finger next to the smallest had been neatly

cut away.

'He bound that finger to hers before we laid her in a tomb beneath the house,' continued Barbier, his voice hushed. 'And he used my blood to write the symbols which he used in his conjuration. When I first saw her ghost I was overtaken by such a terror that I nearly cried out to him to stop, to send her back where she belonged, but I bit my tongue. And when he asked her whether she would rather go to her appointed place, or be bound to this world with me, I felt a tremendous surge of joy which overwhelmed my terror on the instant — for her answer was yes.'

'Her answer was yes.'

'I could not tell what powers Magister Chazal drew upon in order to complete what he had begun. I know that he sacrificed more than I, for I only lost a finger and a little blood, while he seemed to draw upon his own inner life and strength in such a way as to leave them forever depleted.'

'What words he spoke, or what dark daemons may have moved to do his bidding, I cannot begin to understand. But his work was successful, and the ghost of my wife now lives in my house, carrying within her the ghost of my unborn child. And whenever Morrslieb is at its brightest in the night sky, she takes on substance sufficient to allow her to caress me, and receive caresses in return.'



ALPHEUS KALISPERA bowed his head slightly, and said: 'I had thought the change in him was the effect of an affliction which he had in no way invited. I was sure of it.'

'And are you sure now that it was not?' Barbier demanded, with sudden passion. 'Are you so certain, now that you know what you had not guessed before, that he was marked by the evil of his deeds? I tell you that he worked no evil, but exercised his knowledge only to help his friend. If it was judgment on his necromancy which engraved the death-mask on his features,

then it was a cruel and stupid judgment, for he did not deserve it. If there was a debt to be paid, then I should have paid it, and would have done so willingly!

'Have you no faith in your own beliefs, that you would lose them now because of what I have told you? If that is so, I cry shame on you, Magister Kalispera! The man you saw buried today was a man as good as any in the world, and whatever disfigured him was no fault of his, but an undeserved misfortune.'

Kalispera laid his head back and stared off into infinity, before he finally said: 'I do not know what to believe.'

Barbier rose to his feet and looked down at the older man. 'You had best make up your mind,' he said harshly. 'If you will not understand, you must at least keep silent about what I have told you.'

The priest met his visitor's gaze then, and felt a slight shock of fear – but then he remembered that this had once been his pupil, and Lanfranc's friend, and that there was no need to be afraid of him.

'Sit down, my lord,' he said tiredly. 'This is no one's business but our own. I would not denounce you for what you have done, nor would I ever have denounced my friend for helping you. But I cannot say that it was a good thing to do, for it is the most unnatural thing of which I have ever heard.'

Barbier took his seat again, but did not relax. 'Oh yes!' he said. 'Unnatural, to be sure. When a father is utterly without love or compassion – that is natural! When a father murders his son's innocent bride – that is natural! But when a son opposes his father's will and undoes his father's evil – why, that is surely repulsive in its defiance of the laws which the gods have made!'

'Tell me, my white-haired philosopher, is it *natural* for the fops and philanderers of our good King's court to parade themselves in silk and velvet beneath their powdered wigs and painted faces? Is it *natural* that they should live in gaudy luxury while the peasants who work the soil to produce their wealth go hungry? Are their measured dances *natural*, or the games which they play with quoits and skittles? Are their manners and hypocrisies *natural* – or are these noblemen *natural*

only when they ache and bleed like common folk?

'Instruct me, magister, I implore you. Tell me, I pray, why men like you and I should respect and revere what is natural, when everything we are and do is artifice? Your own belief is that disease and illness are but natural shocks to which our fragile flesh is heir, not supernatural punishments sent by the gods or inflicted by the ill-wishing of witches. Lanfranc Chazal's belief was that knowledge of life and death is only knowledge of nature, and that magic is merely control of nature, like other arts and crafts. You could not see a difference between yourself and your lifelong friend this morning – can you really see one now?'

For fully half a minute, Kalispera did not reply. And when he did, it was not with an answer but with a question. 'What will happen,' he asked, 'when you die in your turn, and go to the realm of the dead?'

Barbier laughed, very briefly. 'I cannot tell,' he said. 'If I have the power to curse myself to be a spectre, then I will exert that power with my dying breath, and will be all the closer to my love for sharing her insubstantiality whenever Morrslieb is pale in the sky. And if I have not... then I must wait for her release, as she would have waited for mine, had I not found a necromancer to cast off the chains of nature!'

'And what if you fall in love again?' said the magister, in a low whisper. 'What if you should one day hope for a better child than the ghost of one unborn?'

Barbier shook his head as though to rule the questions impertinent, but Kalispera could see that the man was not untroubled by them. He was a man, after all, and he knew that love is not always eternal, nor the call of duty entirely impotent.

'What will happen when your father dies?' Kalispera said, speaking now as the High Priest of Verena which he also was. 'Will you inherit his title and his estate? And if you do, will you be content to stay in Rondeau, or will you want to show the world how a demesne's affairs could be managed by a better man than your father was? Ten years have passed since you came here as a student, I think, fully seven of them since you left these cloisters – but

what did you truly learn, in the three years or the seven, which makes you sure that you are finished and complete, as changeless as your love-deluded wife? *What right did you really have to demand of Lanfranc Chazal that which he did for you?*'

Barbier was confused now, and taken aback. Whatever he had expected of the old magister, it was not this. 'He was my friend,' he said. 'And a far better father to me than my own parent ever was.'

'Aye,' Kalispera said sadly, 'no doubt that what was he wanted to be. He was my friend, too, but I did not need him as a father. When you combined your catalogue of challenges, you might have asked whether it is natural for priests and magisters to be celibate, so that the only sons they have are those of other men.'

The younger man said nothing.

'Do you love your ghostly wife?' Kalispera asked abruptly.

'I do,' said Barbier boldly. 'With all my heart.'

'And do you think that you can love her forever?'

'By the Lady, I do.'

Alpheus Kalispera shrugged his shoulders, and said: 'Let us hope that your boldness will not let you down, and that your heart is as constant as your father's, after its own very different fashion.'

Barbier bowed his head, and said: 'Thank you for that, magister.' Then he looked up again, and said: 'I hope that you will not think any worse of your friend, because of what I have told you. I did not mean to injure him in your estimation.'

'You have not done that,' Kalispera assured him. 'And I am grateful to know that I am not the only man who will mourn him. If the only epitaph he will have is that which is graven in the memories of other men, I am glad that there are two of us to share the burden of the truth.'

'So am I,' Cesar Barbier said. 'So am I.'

Kalispera got up from his seat and went to the window. He unlatched the glazed lattice, and pushed it back to let in the cool night air. It was not so very dark, for Mannsrieb was full and Morrsrieb, though by no means at its brightest, was shining from another sector of the vault of heaven.

The stars, as always, were too many to be counted. The streets of the city were lit by tiny flames which were similarly numberless, for in a city as munificent as Gisoreux even the poor could afford candles to keep the dark at bay.

'Where is *his* spirit, do you think?' he asked of the younger man.

'Close at hand,' Barbier said softly, 'or far away. Does it matter which?'

'It is written that the spirit of a necromancer is bound to its rotting hull,' the magister said. 'It is further written that such a spirit cannot escape from the hell of that decay, but can sometimes animate the body as a lich with glowing eyes, which spreads terror wherever it goes, and leaves suffering in its train.'

'Do you think that he feared such an end?' Barbier asked, with such faint anxiety that it seemed a mere politeness.

'No man truly knows what he has to fear when he dies,' Kalispera replied. 'Even a man like you, who has brought another back from the life beyond life. No man truly knows.'

Alpheus Kalispera looked down at his hands. They were gnarled and stiff, and the pain in their swollen joints gave him little rest nowadays. Might it reduce his pain, he could not help but wonder, to cut off those fingers which he did not really need? Or was the pain a divine punishment after all, and not — as he had always believed — a mere accident of happenstance?

He had, after all, given succour and sustenance to a secret *necromancer*!

'He was a good man,' Kalispera murmured, not for the first time. 'He was a good friend.'

'In truth he was,' Cesar Barbier said.

And though neither man could know the other's thoughts, both shared at that particular moment in time an identical hope. Each of them was praying, silently and fervently, that whatever god or daemon now had charge of the spirit of Lanfranc Chazal would hear their words, and echo their merciful disposition. ●

IT WAS THE BIG PUSH, WITH
WARBOSS GRIMLUG GOIN' ON
THE BIG WAAAGH! JUST 'COS WE
BLEW UP 'IS GARGANT YARDS AT
BIG SCRAP ALLEY.

LUCKILY, US BOYZ WUZ UP FOR A
FIGHT, SPECIALLY AS HOW WE WUZ
JUST ABOUT TO ATTACK 'IM AS WELL,
AND THEN IT 'APPENED...

FROM OUTTA THE MISTS OF
THE INLAND SEA IT CAME,
'THE GRIMLUG,' WARBOSS
GRIMLUG'S OWN PERSONAL
PRIDE AN' JOY, STRIKIN' FEAR,
TERROR AN' DEEP AN'
ABIDIN' ENVY INTO THE
HEARTS OF IS ENEMIES.

I'LL SAY THIS FOR GRIMLUG'S MEKBOYZ -
THEY SURE KNEW THE GUBBINZ WHEN IT
CAME TO BUILDIN' THINGS DEAD BIG
AN' SHOOTY.

'COURSE, OUR BOYZ COULDN'T COMPETE
WITH NUTHIN' THAT BIG AN' SHOOTY, SO
OLE BADTHUG GOT ALL 'IS FLYBOY
KOMMANDAS TOGETHER AN' GAVE 'EM
THE ORDER...

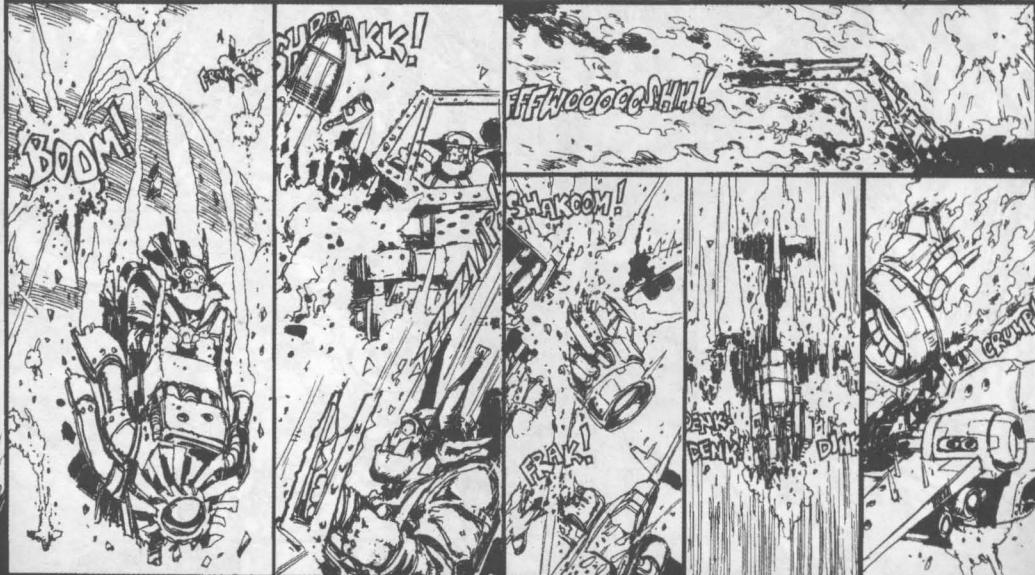
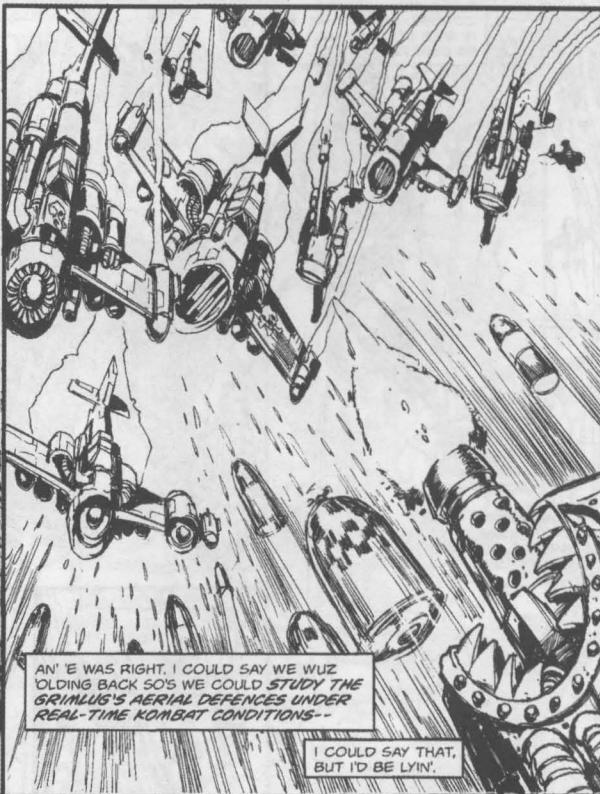
CLANG

DEFF SKWADRON IN:

SINKDA GRIMLUG

(BEIN' ALL ABOUT THE EXPLOITS OF
THE BRAVE BOYZ OF DEFF
SKWADRON, AS HEROICALLY LED
BY KOMMANDA UZGUB, AN' AS
FAITHFULLY RECOUNTED BY IS
SMARTBOY NAVIGATOR GIMZOD.)

SCRIPT: GORDON RENNIE • ART: PAUL STAPLES JEACOCK • LETTERS FIONA STEPHENSON



COURSE, AFTER THAT
IT WUZ STILL GONNA
BE OUR TURN NEXT...

UZGOB TO
DEFF SKWADRON.
ALRIGHT, BOYZ,
FORM UP AN'-

FRAGGIN'
MORK! WHO'S THAT
FLASH GIT BREAKIN'
FORMATION...!?

KILLBOY,
BOSS.

HEH,
GOOD OL'
KILLBOY. AH
WELL, WOT
THE ZOG...

UZGOB
TO DEFF
SKWADRON.
LET'S KAVE
'EM, BOYZ!

I COULD TELL YA THAT US BOYZ FROM DEFF SKWADRON AKWITTED OURSELVES REAL WELL. THAT WE WENT IN THERE AN SHOVED 'EM WOT A HIGH-ALTITUDE PRECISION AIR ATTACK WUZ ALL ABOUT--

I COULD TELL YA
THAT, BUT I'D BE LYIN'.

ONLY DIFFERENCE WAS, WHEN
WE GOT FRAGGED, WE KNEW
OW TO DO IT WIV STYLE!

THERE
GOES
RAZNUTS,
BOSS!

SNEAKY GIT'S GOT A PARACHUTE.
WANNA TURN BACK AN' AVE A
GO AT 'IM WITH THE WING
KANNONS?

HEH,
NO NEED,
GIMZOD...

SPASH!

JUST TAKE A LOOK--OLE RAZNUTS IS GONNA BE SLEEPING WITH THE SQUIG-SHARKS TONIGHT...

TAKIN' 'EAVY FIRE FROM THEM FLAK BATTERIES. KILLBOY--

KILLBOY. 35 MISSIONS FLOWN, 35 REPLACEMENT FIGHTA-BOMMERZ AN' 35 MAJOR BIONIK SURGERY PROCEDURES. 67 KONFIRMED KILLS, INCLUDIN' 43 ACTUALLY BELONGIN' TO THE ENEMY--

ME, BOSS! I'LL TAKE 'EM!

E MAY 'AVE BEEN A TOTAL MADBOY, BUT E KNEW 'OW TO GET THE JOB DONE.

WAAAAAAAAGH!

SO IN WE WENT, AN' I COULD TELL YOU ABOUT 'OW THIS WUZ DEFF SKWADRON'S FINEST HOUR. ABOUT 'OW WE FLEW THROUGH THE FLAK AN' THE BULLETS AN' DROPPED OUR BOMBZ AN' FLEW BACK TO THE BASE WITH THE GRIMLUG BURNIN' AN' SINKIN' BEHIND US--



I COULD TELL YOU THAT,
BUT YOUD ALREADY KNOW
I WUZ LYIN'.

BAAM!



FACT IS, WE GOT FRAGGED TO
ZOG, AN I DON'T THINK WE EVEN
PUT A DENT IN THE GRIMLUG.

ON THE GRIMLUG WAS SUCH
A BIG FRAGGIN' DISASTER
THEN OW COME YOU'RE STILL
'ERE TELLIN' US THE STORY?"' The background is dark and textured." data-bbox="480 530 720 940"/>

SO NOW I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE
THINKIN' -- "IF THE ATTACK
ON THE GRIMLUG WAS SUCH
A BIG FRAGGIN' DISASTER
THEN OW COME YOU'RE STILL
'ERE TELLIN' US THE STORY?"



AN' THAT'S WHEN I GIVES YOU A
GOOD THUMPIN' PER TRYIN' TO
OUTSMART A SMARTBOY, AN'
TELL YOU TO SHUT UP 'COS I
AVENT FINISHED THE STORY YET!

SEE, KOMMANDA UZGOB
DON'T GIVE UP EASY. IN FACT,
HE DONT GIVE UP **AT ALL**,
AN' TWO AGAINST THE
WHOLE OF THE GRIMLUS
WAS BETTER ODDS THAN
WHATEVER BOSS BATHUG
WAS GONNA DO TO US IF WE
CAME BACK **MISSION**
UNAKKOMPLISHED!

FLAMIN' MORK,
BOSS! I'D AVE
THOUGHT SQUIG-
SHARKS COULD JUMP
THIS 'IGH!

SHUT UP AN'
KEEP SHOOTIN', GIMZOD. I'D
BE UP THERE A LOT FRAGGIN'
FASTER IF I WASN'T
CARRYING YOU!

RIGHT, YOU'RE
THE SMARTBOY. TELL
ME 'OW WE SINK
THIS THING!

WELL, BOSS, ALL
THE AMMO IS KEPT IN **THE**
MAGAZINE. IF WE CAN BLOW
IT UP, THE CHAIN REACTION
SHOULD BE ENUFF TO SINK
THE SHIP!

UH-HUH. SO
'OW DO WE FIND
IT AN' 'OW DO WE
BLOW IT UP?

DON'T
WORRY, BOSS.
I GOT AN
IDEA.

K'MON,
PULL! PULL,
YA LAZY
GIZT!





SEE WHAT I MEAN?

GOOD WORK, BOSS!
I RECKON THERE'S GONNA
BE MEDALS AWDED OUT FOR
THIS ONE WHEN WE
GETS BACK!

'ERE, 'OW ARE
WE GONNA GET BACK,
ANY 'OW...?

KOMMANDA
UZGOB, SIR! DEFF
SKWADRON - OR ALL
THAT'S LEFT OF IT -
REPORTIN' FOR
DUTY!

KILLBOY!
AIN'T YOU DEAD
YET...?

MINOR WOUNDS,
SIR, NUTHIN' THE MEDIKS AN' A FEW
MORE BIONIK BITZ CAN'T FIX. 'AVIN'
SURVIVED THE DESTRUCTION OF MY OWN
BOMMA AN' LIBERATED THIS 'ERE
ENEMY AIRKRAFT I WUZ JUST ABOUT
TO TAKE OFF AN' RE-KOMMENCE
ATTACKIN' THE TARGET WHEN
YOU BLEW IT UP, SIR!

'OLD ON TIGHT, SIR.
'ALF THE RUNWAY'S GONE AN'
YOU AINT THE ONLY ONES
WANTIN' OFF 'ERE, SO THIS AINT
GONNA BE AS EASY AS IT
LOOKS!

BUDDA, BUDDA BUDDA!

BEG PARDON, SIR, BUT YOU
COULDNT 'ELP ME WITH THE TAKE-
OFF? LOST ONE OF ME ARMS IN
THE CRASH AGAIN, AN' I'M
'AVIN' TROUBLE USIN' ALL
THE CONTROLS...

KABOOM!

SECONDARY
EXPLOSION FROM THE
AUXILIARY MAGAZINE.
OOPS, FORGOT 'BOUT
THAT ONE...

HEH HEH. "MISSION
AKKOMPLISHED". A QUICK
DETOUR OVER KARNAGE
SKWADRON'S BASE, AN' WE
'EAD FOR 'OME.

KARNAGE
SKWADRON'S BASE,
BOSS?

HEH - THAT'S RIGHT, GIMZOD.
WE'VE GOT A BOMMER 'ERE PAINTED
WITH ENEMY MARKINGS, SO WHO'S
GONNA KNOW IT'S REALLY US IF WE BOMBS
THE PLACE TO ZOG?!

THE END

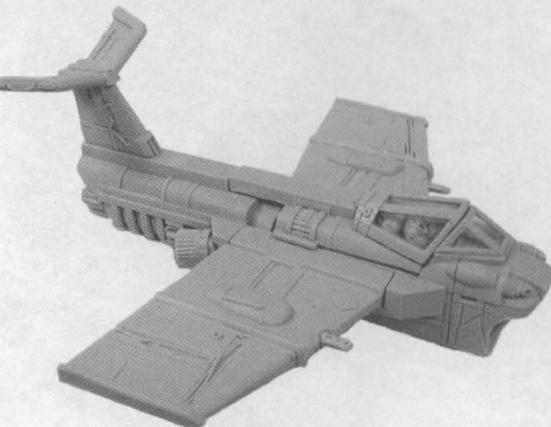
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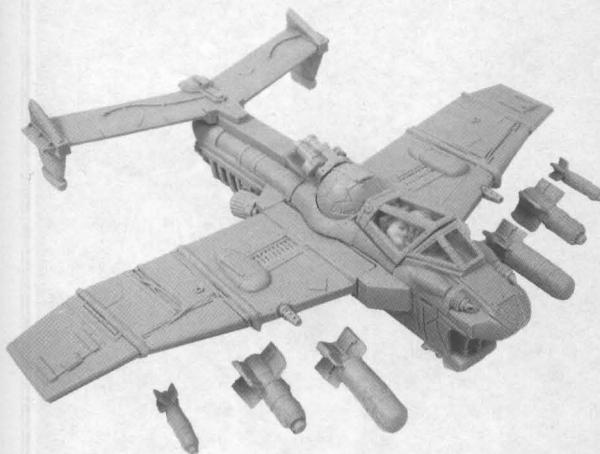
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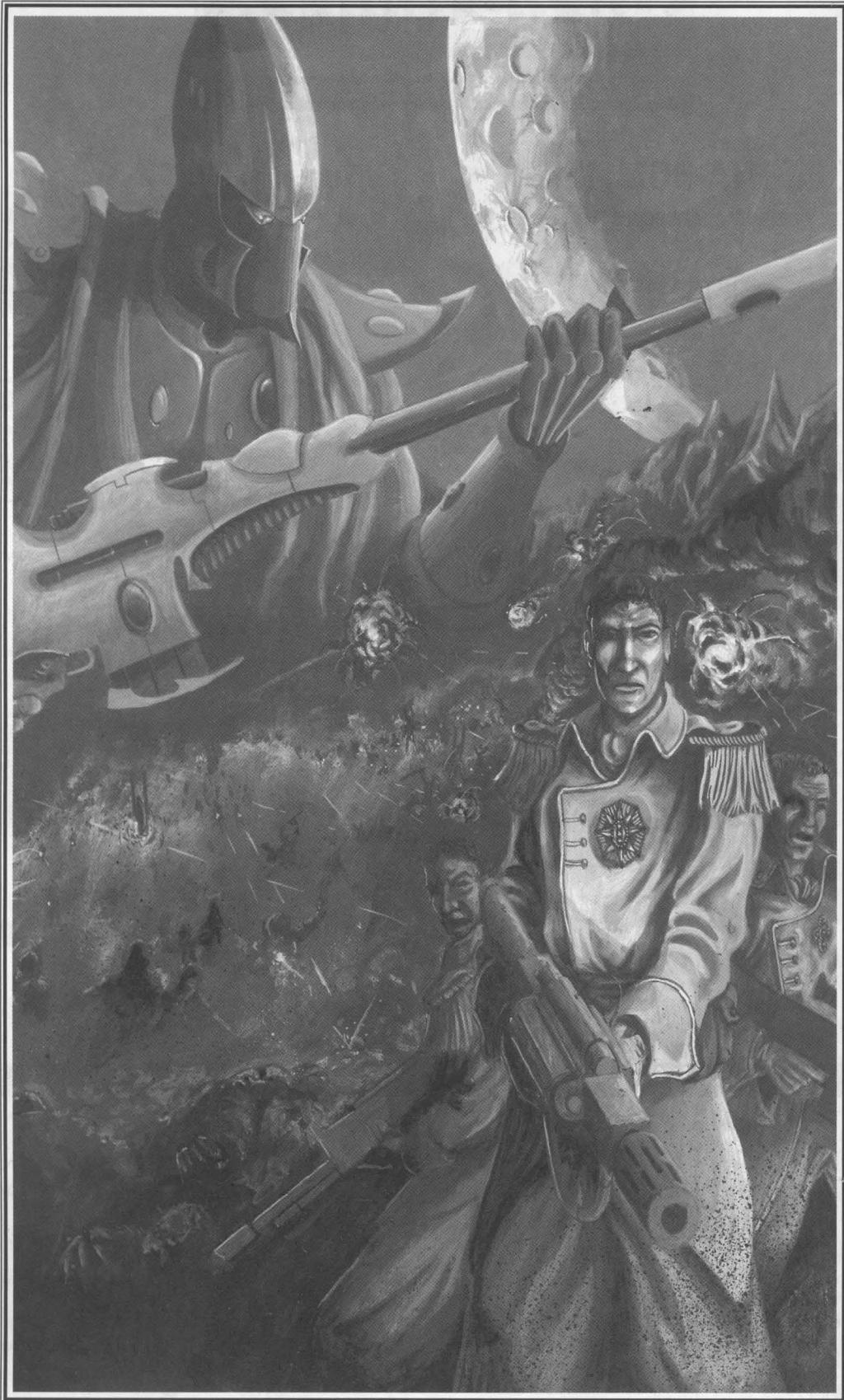
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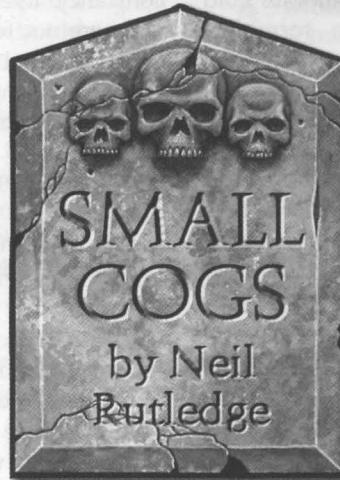
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COLONEL SOTH believed in order, in preparation and attention to detail. But as he stood by the shining, silver doors of the Water Temple he felt far from prepared for the coming battle. True, his face was always somewhat drawn, his sparse flesh stretched tightly over his bones, his body all sinew and muscle; no more room for padding on his frame than there was for luxury in his austere life. And his dark eyes flickered restlessly around the rocky bowl in which the temple stood but this, too, was quite normal.

The colonel, rigid and controlled, did not readily display his emotions and only those who knew him well could have detected the slightest signs of anxiety. The sporadic running of his wiry fingers through his tight, greying curls. The thin lips compressed even more tightly and the occasional barely audible sniff as he straightened his dress uniform.

His dress uniform! That indeed was one of his irritations. Perhaps it was fortunate that his unit of the Ulbaran VIIIth was on ceremonial guard duty for the Water Temple festival when the infernal eldar raided. At least they were able to deploy quickly to secure the area. But to be going to war in their dress uniforms, the splendid attire of a bygone era; clumping old-fashioned boots, the traditional white fibre-cloth itching at the neck and cuffs and the gleaming, lovingly polished pectorals, it was ridiculous! No helmets, no webbing. Praise be to the Emperor that they always paraded armed and with a full complement of heavy weapons! But a slight clenching of his long fingers was another clue to the colonel's worry as he reflected that ammunition was not plentiful. He trusted that Headquarters would get some reinforcements to them soon – and in the meantime they would manage with what they had.



The enemy worried him too, the mysterious eldar! What were *they* doing here on the agri-world of Luxoris Beta? Colonel Soth was an experienced and well-trained officer but other than the ork pirates his men had defeated to liberate this planet two years previously, he had never faced aliens before. Nor had any of the men. They had manuals, training materials and hol-

exercises, but these were not reality. Even the supposedly simplistic orks had constantly produced harrowing surprises in action. What would the inhumanly sophisticated eldar do?

Routine, practice and experience produced confident warriors. This had long been one of Colonel Soth's basic maxims. But they had had no experience against this foe. Lack of practice and experience meant uncertainty – and uncertainty meant fear.

Soth remembered the nervous eyes of the young lasgunner catching his, and the boy's anxious question. 'Do they really skin their captives alive, sir?'

With an outward calm which did not entirely reflect his inner feelings, the colonel had reassured the guardsman. Such barbarity he had explained, was not practised by these eldar and besides, if the guardsmen followed orders and shot straight, no alien would capture them anyway. Colonel Soth was almost confident in his advice. From what he had gleaned, these were not the so-called dark eldar, the notorious piratical renegades, but then what was the difference anyway? They were all aliens, all humanity's enemies.

He mentally castigated himself for such futile speculation and was about to return to his command post when a soft footfall behind him made him stop and turn. It was the priest from the temple, Jarendar. He was a tall man and, in his full ceremonial costume, he made a striking figure. Even in the shade of the temple portico, his long

white kilt gleamed and the elaborate gold pectoral, set with rubies to form the symbols of the Ecclesiarchy glinted brightly, catching the light reflected from the huge doors. As Soth looked into the priest's face he was struck by a similar effect. The man had a strong jaw and jutting nose and though his gaze was even, there was a sense of masked strength and confidence.

A strength more than spiritual, the colonel thought, as he noted how the heavy gold and red leather head-dress spread down across powerful shoulders more like those of a labourer or warrior than a priest.

'The Emperor's light shine upon you,' the priest greeted him formally. The worship of the Divine Emperor here on Luxoris had acquired its own unique trappings in the eighteen hundred years since it had first been settled, but its people were devoted servants nevertheless.

'And also on you,' Soth replied.

'Are your defences prepared, colonel? Is there more my servant or I can do to assist you?' The priest's voice was calm, Soth noted with approval. He had courage even on the verge of an alien attack.

'We are as ready as we can be.' The colonel gestured towards his gleaming parade boots with his gilded ceremonial baton. 'But we are not exactly conventionally attired for action.' There was another slight sniff.

'Who can fully understand the will of the Emperor?' Jarendar asked. 'Had it not been for the festival you would not have been here to deploy to protect us. As you said yourself, if the cursed eldar realise the irrigation controls are here and they can flood the levels to impede our reinforcements, they will certainly attempt to capture the temple.'

'It is not an orderly way to conduct a defence.' Soth spoke almost to himself. 'We are not properly attired or equipped.'

'Properly attired?' The priest smoothed his kilt. 'These garments go back to the dark days of our slavery to the orks, before the Emperor gathered us once more to his bosom, praise him always. Yet even in those terrible times some were able to resist.'

'And,' he added, pointing at the rubies on his pectoral, 'these garments are marked now with the symbols of the Emperor's

constancy. Even when we struggled alone we were not forgotten. Why is this temple here, Colonel Soth? It is to thank the Emperor for his blessing, in giving us the means to control the irregular rains of this harsh land so that we may offer him this land's bounty. In the short term we may see difficulties. In the long term, the Emperor cares for his children.'

Soth was irritated – and was even more annoyed that he could not control his irritation in the presence of this calm priest. 'But how,' he asked sharply, 'can a commander exercise proper control without even adequate comm-links?' He tapped the low-powered wrist communicator he was wearing to emphasize his point.

The priest pointed to where his servant, a young novice, stood by one of the pillars of the portico. 'Rigeth, my servant, he understands. He knows he is only a novice, a servant, a minute component in the Emperor's divine plan. We priests in charge of temples, or colonels in charge of regiments, are inclined to forget that we are merely servants too; only one tiny piece in the Emperor's great whole. Would you allow your men to question—'

A sudden, shrieking whine and burst of laser fire from the great ridge above them cut off the priest's homily. 'The eldar!' Soth spat. 'It's begun! Get to safety. I must reach my command post!' Leaving the priest, he began sprinting up the slope to where he had set up his headquarters on the rocky edge.

The section of the ridge surrounding the depression in which the temple sat was not the steepest. To gain some cover, Soth kept off the road but the surrounding terrain was rough. He needed to concentrate on his footing and as he raced on, he dared only to glance around himself from time to time, sporadically catching sight of the blurs of red screaming along the edge of the crest, their progress marked by staccato spurts of rock dust. The ghastly screech of projectiles ricochetting off the boulders was audible even over the shriek of their engines. These, he assumed, were the eldar's notorious jetbikes, a first wave of attack to soften up his defences and keep his men's heads down.

He paused just before the lip of the great ridge, crouching against a boulder. The tumbled rocks of the ridge offered good cover and he could see the bright stab of lasgun fire as his troops offered up some form of defence. Praying that the eldar weren't trying some form of jamming against which his own dress-issue communicator would be useless, he barked into his wrist unit, 'Soth to Captain Hoddish.'

'Hoddish receiving, sir.' The captain's voice was crisp even over the vox-link.

'Pass the order to cease lasgun fire against the jetbikes. We haven't the ammunition to waste.'

The colonel continued up the slope, his teeth clenched. He could hear Hoddish using the command vox-link. 'Hoddish to all units: no lasgun fire on jetbikes. Don't waste power against those lightning spirits. Save it for the infantry.'

The jetbikes continued their attack passes and Soth had to hurl himself behind a boulder as one craft hurtled straight for him, its projectiles singing an unearthly war-cry as they fragmented the rocks all around him. He caught a split-second glimpse of the alien's helmet as its craft howled overhead. This was certainly a far cry from fighting orks. Even the very sounds of battle were different.

Now, as he approached the top of the ridge, the enemy fire was more intense – but the eldar were not having things all their own way. As one larger jet craft tore across the wide depression there was a flash and a spurt of smoke as a missile was launched by the fire-team posted on the ornate roof of the ancient temple. The eldar craft jerked sharply and dived for the far rim of the rocky bowl but Soth watched the flare of the missile as it blasted towards the enemy, guiding true to catch the vehicle and detonate with a thunderous explosion just short of the crest. The blazing wreckage seemed to fall in mesmerising slow motion and it was only with some effort that Soth managed to tear his eyes away and dash for the summit.



AMIDST A SERIES of blasts from some unseen enemy heavy weapon down the far side of the great slope, the colonel dived into his hastily improvised command post. There, amidst the slightly better shelter of the hurriedly piled rocks and scraped depressions (no text book trench could be dug in this terrain!) Colonel Soth rapidly appraised himself of the developing attack. He led sound troops and they held a strong defensive perimeter, commanding both the temple depression and its surrounding approaches. If it hadn't been for their lack of proper equipment and the unknown nature of their enemy he would have been as confident as any Imperial Guard officer should dare to be.

Crouched under the shadow of a huge sandy-coloured boulder, he hastily conferred with Hoddish and his other staff, while the command comm-link operator – a small, leathery skinned veteran of many anti-pirate operations with the Ulbaran VIIIth – coolly passed them updates from other sections as best as their limited equipment allowed.

'I do not think they are fully pressing us yet, sir,' Hoddish was saying when a deathly howl, followed by a rattling storm of shrapnel and rock fragments made all the men suddenly crouch even lower. Hoddish grinned as the noise subsided, patting a long tear in the still smartly-creased sleeve of his dress jacket. His round face had always struck Soth as peculiarly boyish, with his thin moustache only serving to further the impression of a youth trying to pass as a man. He had a cool head though and continued, unperturbed.

'The main attack has yet to develop. This is just to soften us up. There do not seem to be many enemy and they do not appear to have much armour or heavy weaponry. The best information we can gain from central command is that the whole assault is some form of raid rather than an invasion. I suggest our opponents are a force dispatched to attempt to flood the levels to stop our armour from getting into action. I expect they will press all our perimeter from the air but concentrate on the ground, attempting a breakthrough at just one point.'

'Here, perhaps?' Soth mused out loud. 'We have the widest view but it is the easiest section of the ridge to break through.'

'Yes, sir,' the captain agreed.

As if on cue, there was a shout from a nearby trooper: 'Enemy advancing, sir!'

Soth crawled forward cautiously. The slopes of the ridge raked back on both sides of the spur on which he had located his command post but the guardsman who had called the warning gestured down the left slope. He was another younger man and he looked pale, his knuckles showing white where they gripped his meltagun. His cap was jammed down ridiculously tight on his head, perhaps to try to shield his ears from the ghastly racket of the jetbikes.

'Sir...' He looked nervously at the colonel.

'Yes, guardsman?'

'They're not really spirits, are they sir?'

Soth was mystified. 'Explain yourself.'

'The flying eldar, sir. They're not... spirits, are they?'

Suddenly the words of Hoddish's warning not to waste ammunition against the flying craft came back to Soth. He looked the young guardsman in the eye. 'No, they are not spirits. Captain Hoddish spoke only figuratively. Did you not see the one downed by the missile? And, guardsman...'

'Yes, sir.'

'Straighten your cap!'

'Yes, sir!' The young man showed a slight smile as he carried out the colonel's order.

Soth scrutinised the scene down the slope. He didn't even have viewers but Hoddish passed him a lasgun with a targeter and he was able to search for the enemy more effectively. The slope was a mass of tumbled rock dotted with thorny scrub. It made good concealment for them but also offered the enemy ample cover for a cautious advance. Soth forced himself to concentrate carefully amidst the growing barrage along their section of ridge. They were coming all right! Overhead the jetbike sweeps seemed to intensify yet further. The colonel doubted if they were causing many casualties but they were keeping the guardsmen from grouping to counter the mounting attack.

'Pass the order to hold fire until range band amber,' he instructed Hoddish without taking his eye from the targeter. 'Heavy weapons to target armour or support troops only!'

He could pick out occasional movements but no clear targets. Suddenly, further along the ridge some form of dreadnought or similar fighting machine appeared from behind a tangle of thorns. There was the crackling whoosh of a lascannon shot from their left and beyond that the staccato tattoo of a heavy bolter, but with frightening speed the machine strode across some open ground and with a grace more organic than mechanised vaulted into a gully and out of sight.

The colonel could hear the young guardsman swearing nervously beside him. In truth Soth could remember scant details of such machines but said clearly, loud enough for the meltagunner to hear, 'An eldar dreadnought. Fast but poorly armoured. They always suffer at shorter ranges.'

There were increasing signs of movement down slope and the eldar infantry were starting to open fire. The air was full of the whine of their strange projectiles and sharp cracks as they ricocheted off the rock. As they came closer the storm intensified and the guardsmen began to reply. Soth nodded approval to himself at the disciplined nature of his men's firing. The eldar advance slowed but now under cover of the fire of their supporting infantry and the continuing, howling passes of the jetbikes, a new threat showed. In several places turrets were rising above scrub patches and rocky outcrops and a torrent of heavier fire was poured on the guards. A deadly duel began between the well-placed and concealed cannons of the guards and the bobbing and weaving grav-tanks of the eldar – and all the time the alien infantry pressed gradually closer.

The guardsmen were taking casualties but the constant drill and practice that Colonel Soth had always insisted on, was paying off. One grav-tank exploded, setting ablaze the patch of scrub in which it had been inadequately concealed. The smoke drifted across their front and under this cover the strange dreadnought machine ventured out of the gully – only to be caught in a torrent of heavy bolter fire that buckled one of its legs, tumbling it back into the gulch.

The enemy continued to advance, however, and suddenly the storm of doom broke loose. The jetbikes broke off but the remainder of the aliens charged, firing their

bizarre weapons as they came. The guardsmen poured down a fusillade of fire but still the tide surged up the slope. One more grav-tank exploded away to the left but, almost directly in front of them, another whined forwards, weapons blazing as it outstripped its escorting infantry.

'In the Emperor's name: where is that lascannon?' Hoddish was shouting. The tank was getting closer, heading for a dip in the crest, the red-armoured alien troops storming after it.

Soth grabbed the meltagun off the young guardsman beside him. 'Cover me!' he cried as he sprinted across the slope. He could hear shouts behind him and lasgun bolts echoing off the rocks but it was the sudden zing of eldar projectiles around him that he was most conscious of as he ran, desperate to cut across the advance of the grav-tank and get close enough for a shot. He was closing the range when something snatched at his leg and he fell, tumbling wildly down the slope. With a painful tearing he was brought up, caught fast in a thorn bush, staring at the red wall of the passing grav-tank. Too shocked even to aim properly, he raised the meltagun and fired. There was the distinctive hiss and then a crashing as the blast tore into the plates at the rear of the alien vehicle, which whined on by.

Soth could see an eldar approaching and struggled to free himself from the thorn bush to bring the meltagun to bear. The alien figure was raising its long, strangely-fashioned weapon, its tall, almost insectoid helmet a blank mask of menace. But before it could fire there was a flash on its chest as it was hit and it dropped.

There was a fusillade of fire from behind Soth as the guardsmen counter-attacked. The colonel found his arm grabbed by the young guardsman whose weapon he had snatched. The youth was shouting and waving his laspistol as, with his other hand, he helped Soth out of the bush. 'You got it, sir! You got the tank.'

But he had no time to say more before two of the red aliens charged them. Soth dropped back to his knees as a shot knocked the meltagun from his hands. His young companion managed to drop one eldar with his pistol and the other was dispatched by the bayonet of a huge sergeant with a bald and scarred head almost as inhuman as the

aliens' helmets.

The firing and tumult of battle continued but it faded slightly and moved downhill. The enemy were being driven back. Soth, eagerly assisted by the young guardsman, took cover behind a jagged boulder and examined his leg where he had been hit. There was a good deal of blood on his now less-than-pristine dress trousers but he had been fortunate and the wound was only a long gash across his calf. Lacking his webbing and full kit he had to improvise a dressing with cloth torn from his shirt. Even so, he managed to staunch the bleeding and prepared himself for action once more. The hiss and whine of the eldar infantry's weapons was less noticeable now but the air was once more filled with the awful howl of the jetbikes as they shrieked back to the attack.

'Back to the command post,' Soth ordered the men. 'And keep your heads down.'

It was a short stretch to cover but it was a tense dash as they raced back to the improvised headquarters. Captain Hoddish knew his commander too well to waste time on congratulating him on the destruction of the grav-tank. He merely grinned his boyish grin and, after a simple, 'Good to see you back, sir,' quickly updated the colonel on the situation. They had taken some casualties, ammunition was holding, for the present, but the eldar had probably only paused in their assault. If they were to impede the Imperial advance and gain any benefit from flooding the levels, their enemy would have to move fast.



THE SUN WAS beginning to sink and throw long, jagged shadows amongst the rocks and thorns. The low light brought an astonishing warmth to the reds, sand yellows and ochres of the broken terrain. It was a harsh land but under this light it achieved a mellow beauty that struck even the practical Soth.

But there was no time for pondering on such beauty now. The rich, blue sky of evening was suddenly full of the streaking red of the jetbikes once more and the colonel

again had some anxious moments as he made his way to inspect their positions prior to the expected second alien attack. Of particular concern to him was the lascannon emplacement that had been silent. He had feared the crew were dead but finally, after crawling and sliding through jagged rocks and grasping thorns he finally reached their position, he found the men alive.

Coated in sweat and dust, a stocky corporal was feverishly stripping the weapon mounting down. His fellow crewman, forearms and tunic front stained with oil, was examining the components closely.

'Praise the Throne, I have it!' he shouted, his proud face a picture of relief. Sighing and wiping the sweat from his forehead, he only succeeded in smearing his face with oil; wide-eyed with delight, he presented more the aspect of an ancient barbarian than a smart guardsman. Both men looked up to notice Soth at the same time and simultaneously they moved to stand and salute him.

'At ease!' Soth ordered curtly, waving them to stay put. 'What have you got, trooper?'

'Grit, sir!' the oil-smeared gunner replied. 'It was jamming the traverse cog.'

'How did grit get in the traverse gears?' The colonel's voice was sharp and full of meaning.

'I don't know, sir. It must have been as we emplaced.' The gunner's voice had acquired a slightly nervous edge. Soth was a strict officer and the lascannon's failure to track the grav-tank had jeopardised both their own position and their colonel's life.

There was a short pause before Soth asked, 'Carelessness, gunner?'

'Yes, sir!' It was the corporal who spoke now. He was still on his knees but he had stiffened to a sort of attention. Eyes rigidly front, his strong jaw thrust out but caked in grime and his dark curls blonde with dust, he made a bizarre picture. He continued quickly, 'I must have rushed too much while emplacing the gun, sir.'

The colonel gave one of his soft sniffs of irritation. This whole action was so disorderly! 'These are difficult conditions, corporal, but that makes attention to detail even more important. It is often the smallest

cogs that are the most important. Neatness, care, dedication, these are all as necessary to a guardsman of the Emperor as being able to shoot straight!'

The slight flicker of a smile cracked the flat face of the other gunner. Soth swung on him at once. 'Yes, soldier?'

The man instantly stiffened too. 'Sorry, sir! I was just thinking that we are not too neat just now, sir.'

Soth clenched his fingers. 'No, soldier – but we can still maintain our weapons, even if our uniforms suffer. Get this cannon reassembled and let me see your training pay off!'

'Yes, sir!' both men chorused and Soth continued his rounds with caution.



AS THE COLONEL was heading carefully back to the command post the jetbike passes seemed to ease once more and a rising thunder of las-fire from over the ridge heralded a further eldar attack. Soth had climbed higher to just beyond the ridge top in an attempt to find a path where he could make faster progress. Now with the aerial attack switched to other sections of the ridge, he risked less cover and managed to jog and scramble along just below the crest. It was still tough going and the sting from his flesh wound made him wince as he scrabbled up out of a gully. Still, there was a smoother section ahead and he was prepared to chance a dash across it.

As he stood on the gully edge, he unconsciously moved to straighten his uniform, re-adjusting the bronze pectoral on his chest. It was a misplaced gesture of habit – but it saved the colonel's life. As he moved the bronze plate, something slammed into it with a sharp shock and hiss. It was more a reflex action than the impact that hurled Soth back over the lip of the gully.

A sniper! His brain whirled as he instinctively switched his position, sliding and slipping as carefully as he could, following the gully downhill again. How had an alien sniper penetrated their position?

As Soth pulled himself up to where an overhanging thorn bush offered some chance of concealment for a cautious reconnaissance, he glanced at the small, melted hole in the pectoral. He had no doubt that embedded in that hole was a deadly, toxic dart. When the attack had first started he had considered discarding the pectoral but his own sense of neatness and propriety had stopped him. After all, it was part of the regulation dress uniform. The Emperor be praised for his own fastidiousness!

All this spun through Soth's mind as, with the utmost caution, his laspistol ready in his hand, he pulled himself up behind the thorn bush. His view was restricted but he gained a reasonable grasp of the sweep of slope in front of him. The most likely place of concealment for the alien was another patch of stunted thorn slightly up slope from where he watched. The ground was relatively open, as he had noted previously. It would be hard for his adversary to move without being spotted, but then what of those cameleoline cloaks he recalled from long-past training? As he pondered, straining his eyes for any clue to the alien's whereabouts, a brief movement caught his eye, a quick reddish flick behind a rock. Soth's vision, long used to the arid terrain and hardened wildlife of his homeland, at once discounted it as one of the large chaser lizards that laired amongst these tumbled boulders.

Just a lizard... but what had startled it?

He carefully scoured the area around where he had seen the creature move. Each rock and tuft of dried vegetation was scrutinised. Every shadow evaluated.

Got it! Only Soth's long training and habitual discipline prevented a hiss of amazement from escaping his compressed lips. As it was, his grip tightened involuntarily on his laspistol. It seemed a rock had moved! Now that he had spotted the alien it was easier to track its wary progress. Its camouflage was truly incredible, making it almost impossible to spot as, crouching almost double, it crept across the rocks.

'Are they really spirits, sir?' The young guardsman's words came back to him. It would be easy to believe it!

To be moving thus across the open, the alien probably thought him dead but it obviously retained some caution. It was too far away for Soth to risk a shot with his pistol. He would somehow have to get closer. One pistol-armed guard colonel in ragged dress uniform against a near-invisible, needle rifle toting and possibly armoured alien? He didn't give much for his chances!

His best hope was to drop back into the gully, crawl higher up the slope and pray he could spot the eldar by peering from behind the larger boulders there. All the time he hadn't taken his eyes off the ghostly progress of the alien but now he was going to have to. He judged the sniper's line of progress as best he could and inched back into the gully. He felt the prickle of sweat on his palm where it gripped the laspistol and his heart thumped in his ribs as he moved, carefully judging each step, back up the small gorge.

It seemed agonisingly slow progress but eventually he was in place to risk a glimpse from behind the boulders. Setting his cap to one side and holding his breath he peered round. No dart pierced him but, look as he might, he could see no sign of the alien. A knot began to form in his stomach when there was a sudden crackle and voice beside him.

'Hoddish to Colonel Soth!' his communicator crackled.

There was a sudden confusion of the rocks almost directly ahead of him, as if his vision had blurred for a second. Reflexively Soth fired.

'Hoddish to Colonel Soth. Are you all right, sir? Hoddish to Colonel Soth.'

The colonel, somewhat shaken, raised his wrist communicator. 'Soth receiving. I'm fine, captain.'

'We are holding the enemy, sir, but ammunition is depleting.'

'I'll be with you shortly, captain. Take extreme care to be alert for infiltrating snipers and ensure the men are warned also. I've just bagged an alien scout. Soth out.'

The colonel had heard rather than seen the eldar fall but by looking carefully he could now make out the body, only partially covered by the concealing cloak. The needle

rifle had fallen separately and he could see its oddly graceful stock protruding from some dried weeds. The alien appeared dead but Soth took no chances and, keeping his pistol trained on the body, he advanced carefully.

Soth stood over the body of the dead scout, staring down at the strangely flowing features of the alien's respirator mask. These eldar devils made him shudder. The neat hole in the creature's forehead, burned by his laspistol shot, seemed a more natural eye than the opalescent crystalline lenses beneath it. The lowering sun cast strong shadows amongst the harsh tumbled rocks and, even dead and prone at his feet, the cameleoline cloak broke up the eldar's outline in a most disconcerting fashion. The colonel concentrated on the more clearly defined respirator mask but the sun's rays, lacing over the yellow heights, made the iridescent lenses flicker with eerie life and he turned away.

Soth knew he should get back to the battle, the fury of which he heard just down-slope beyond the boulders. It had been a close run thing though and he was content to snatch a moment's rest. He was still breathing heavily, but more importantly something was nagging him, jabbing the back of his mind with anxiety and the pit of his stomach with persistent adrenaline.

How had the scout infiltrated their perimeter?

In an unconscious gesture of order, he straightened the life-saving pectoral on his chest and started as if a revelation had come directly from the metal itself. The grav-tank! Who had cleared it? A ghastly dread washed over him as he sprinted across the steep slope of the bowl towards the still gently smoking wreck. Dust and small stones skittered from under his boots as he gingerly negotiated the steep flow of the scree across which the enemy tank had ploughed before landing against a rock spire.

The falcon was clearly a wreck. It had spun around to face up the slope and the front end was burnt out. The rear seemed less damaged however and it was to here that Soth carefully made his way, the sharp edges of the rocks scratching his hands, the stink from the burnt vehicle scouring his nostrils.

The door of the internal compartment hung slightly ajar. Prudence dictated proper clearance procedure but the colonel was on his own and besides, he reckoned it was too late now for prudence. He confidently expected to find something more awful, in its own way, than an armed and lurking eldar. Steadying himself against the rock spire, laspistol at the ready, he kicked the hanging door aside.

Cursing, he lost his balance as the door seemed to bounce from his foot. What hellish stuff did these aliens build their vehicles from? It certainly wasn't the weighty metal of their own Chimeras! But no attack from within caught him off guard. Instead he stared at the charred and twisted bodies of more eldar scouts. Most still sat strapped to their seats in death. One, torn free by the mad careering of the doomed vehicle, was flung mangled, against his comrades. But this time Soth's eyes were not held by the blank stare of the alien respirator masks, they were riveted to the empty seats. He desperately counted and re-counted.

Five empty seats. One scout torn free. One killed by him... There are three of the devils alive out there. And he knew where they would be heading!



COLONEL SOTH gazed down at the distant Water Temple, thinking furiously. Three camouflaged alien snipers! The temple, covered by the guards' ridge top heavy weapons, was defended by only an anti-aircraft section. From his own experience with the alien heretic, Soth didn't doubt that the three remaining eldar could easily evade or dispatch the unwitting guardsmen. He must act fast!

Quickly he radioed Hoddish. 'How pressed are you, captain?'

'It's quite tough, sir.' The statement was given in Hoddish's usual cheerful manner but Soth knew that this mild phrase meant that the guards were under heavy attack. 'Ammunition is getting low but we're holding out.'

'Hoddish, I am sure our perimeter has been breached by three alien scouts and they will attempt to infiltrate the Water Temple. Use the command link to alert the missile teams there. Warn them that the enemy are extremely difficult to locate due to their camouflage cloaks, and that their weapons are silent. Spare me just three men, experienced guardsmen, and I'll attempt to contain the situation. Get them to bring me an extra lasgun. I'm just over the ridge from you, holed up by the wrecked grav-tank.'

'Yes sir! I'll dispatch them at once.'

Soth racked his brains to try to think of how best to combat the alien scouts. As he pondered, he threw away his officer's cap and stripped some of the more prominent braid from the grimy tatters that had so recently been his best uniform. There was no point in providing the alien devils with an even more obvious target than he already was. Appearing like this and carrying a standard lasgun he hoped he would not stand out from the other men. Soth was no coward but he wanted to deal with the alien scum personally.

As he straightened up from checking the makeshift dressing on his leg, he caught sight of the men Hoddish had sent to assist him. They skittered and slid briskly down the loose scree, before jogging up and saluting.

'Sergeant Tarses reporting for duty sir!'

It was the bald and scarred NCO who had led the counter-charge that had saved Soth that afternoon. This afternoon! It seemed an age away! Soth was pleased with Hoddish's choice. The sergeant was a tough customer and a veteran of several operations against the orks. He was an expert in close combat and fairly bulged out of the white cloth of his uniform – which he had somehow managed to preserve in a far neater state than his comrades. Tarses had a reputation for ferocity that went beyond the wild looks given to him by his heavy brows, missing right ear and the pale scar that twisted across his cheek and chin. But, as he handed Soth a lasgun, his face was as calm as if on parade.

'Also, Corporal Nibbeth and Guardsman Sokkoth, sir. Guardsman Sokkoth specifically volunteered to assist you, sir.'

Both the other men saluted. Nibbeth was another veteran, a short man but of the same wiry build as Soth himself. He had a calm sureness in his stance and movement, even on the loose scree, and the colonel noted with interest the sniper's badge on the torn sleeve of his tunic. Sokkoth was the young meltagunner who had rescued Soth from the bush. He was inexperienced but he had certainly acquitted himself well on that occasion. There was an earnestness in his thin face and bright eyes as he saluted. Soth had seen such devotion before in many young recruits. He hoped the lad was not to pay heavily for his keenness.

They moved off as rapidly as they could over the difficult terrain, Soth issuing orders for the advance on the temple as they went. There was a plan but a sketchy one, the kind of plan Soth hated and had often chided junior officers for on exercise. Too much was being left to chance! But they had been caught on parade by this ghostly enemy and their options were severely limited. Not even Tarses had any form of comm-link and Soth judged it prudent that they should operate as one group to maintain contact.

Hoddish had alerted the missile teams and there was little else they could do other than proceed with caution and hope for the best. As they cleared the slopes and moved out onto the flat base of the depression, Soth attempted to use his wrist communicator to raise the guards stationed at the temple but without success. The sun had dipped behind the ridge and he strained to see the temple clearly in the fading light. The missile team should have been contactable with even the short range unit by now and the colonel feared the worst. Several times as he was descending, he had thought he had heard the crack of a lasgun shot from the direction of their goal, once even a faint cry, but against the background noise of battle from over the ridge top it was impossible to be sure. Soth knew his fears of infiltration to be well-grounded but how much was his proper concern turning to feverish imagination? His mind's eyes locked in memory with the eerie stare of the dead sniper he had so luckily managed to defeat and a brief shiver, owing nothing to the evening chill, ran down his spine. Grimly he pushed the memory aside and signalled to the other men to increase their separation as they hastened on.

THE GROUND was flat at the bottom of the depression and, although still rocky and scattered with clumps of brush, offered little cover compared to the ridge walls. The colonel felt his heart beat faster as they reached the broad, paved ceremonial road which led to the temple. Sweat slicked his hands and his eyes scanned each boulder and bush as he prepared to dash across the road. Never had he felt so appallingly vulnerable. Was it even worthwhile attempting to find cover from these fiendish, invisible death dealers? He looked over to where Sokkoth was ready to cover his dash over the road, nodded and ran. The slap of his boots on the paving stones rung in his ears even over the noise of battle echoing from the ridge tops and it was with clear relief that he finally dropped into the broad drainage conduit at the far edge of the road.

At once, he sprinted further up and took up position to cover Nibbeth, who was to follow him, and Sokkoth and Tarses, who were to advance up the other ditch. The others were across in seconds. Nibbeth sprinted over the road and sprang into the trench with the speed and ease of a desert gazelle and Soth made a mental note to commend Hoddish on his choice of men.

The conduits, paved to carry and channel the surging flows of water that accompanied the irregular rains, offered the best chance of a covered approach to the temple. Now dry, their reddish stones warm in the afterglow that just reached them from the over rim of the bowl, they would provide at least the illusion of concealment while, closer to the temple, the towering sandstone statues, erected to the glory of the Emperor and the great amongst His children, would offer further cover.

Soth wiped his hands on the torn remnants of his tunic and cautiously jogged forward up the conduit. Suddenly he froze as there was a dull detonation from somewhere ahead. There was still a constant backdrop of noise from the fighting beyond the ridge behind them but this explosion had been to the front.

The colonel thought of the massive temple doors. A demolition charge? He knew clearly now they could expect no help from the missile team at the temple. What were these aliens? How could three of them

wipe out an entire anti-aircraft squad with such ease and so silently? But then Soth had met one of these devils face-to-face and he knew only too well.

He attempted to hasten forward but he felt strangely weak. This was not war as he knew it, calmly facing the hulking brutality of the orks, meeting their primitive power and ferocity with nerve and disciplined firepower. Now it was he and his guardsmen who seemed the primitives. The memory of the dead eldar's remarkable camouflage haunted Soth as he moved on, his eyes sweeping the rocks on either side. How could he hope to spot the enemy? Only luck had saved him before. There was a knot in his stomach quite different from the normal adrenaline he felt before combat. Soth was a veteran. A cool head, discipline and training had always carried him through but now, just as the sweat ran under the high collar of his ceremonial tunic, the first tingling of fear chafed under his normal tempered resolve. There was a sound ahead. All at once he leapt sideways, swinging up his lasgun. But it had only been the slight rustling of dead stems in the first stirrings of a light evening breeze. The colonel forced himself to breathe deeply, calm as he turned to signal the all-clear to Nibbeth who followed on behind.



THEY SOON reached the lines of colossal statues which flanked the roadway on its final approach to the temple. Soth had always found the giant figures, sculpted stiff in the style of the ancient, desert-dwelling ancestors of the Luxorians, the first colonists, to be foreboding. Now, looking up at the august images of priests, commanders and dignitaries, he felt not that these pillars of the Empire were watching over him, but rather that they held a vague menace, frowning disapproval on his unkempt appearance and fast beating heart.

He paused under the enormous stylised feet of the statue of the Adeptus Astartes commander who had been the first person to set foot on this planet in the name of the

Emperor. The evening breeze blew more steadily and as it ruffled through Soth's tight curls, drying his sweat. He felt chilled. What would that ancient commander have done here? He would have hardly had to have come skulking up a drain! Soth had a sudden mental image of the Space Marine trying to manoeuvre his bulky power armour up the conduit and, oddly, it cheered him. He suddenly grinned to himself. After all, wasn't the kind of covert approach, lightly equipped, that he was performing exactly how his ancestors would have raided from the cold deserts back on his own homeworld? This land was his to protect now and he would deal with these alien devils yet! Tradition should be, must be, upheld.

He waved his men to continue and soon they were at the point where the conduit swung to go around the temple. He still felt vulnerable, still felt tense but the relief he had felt under the statue had not dissipated entirely. They had a plan, if only a rough one. This was the rear of the temple, the side opposite the building's only entrance. There were probably only three enemy scouts facing them. There was a chance they might all be able to dash to the relative shelter of the surrounding portico and make an attempt on the temple doors. Each of them had his duty and his part to play and, to Soth, duty and a clear role were sacred.

He was exceptionally careful as he moved into his covering position, crawling warily up the steep side of the conduit in the shadow of another giant statue. He felt calmer, though, and was thankful that his hands were no longer damp with nervous sweat. He checked to his right and saw Nibbeth silently inching himself into position alongside him. In front of them, across the flagged rear court, the massive octagonal columns of the temple portico rose out of the deep gloom at their base. Predictably perhaps, he could see no sign of the enemy but he tensed as he spotted the brutal evidence of their actions. Slumped on the broad steps of the raised portico, leaning back against one of the great, sandstone pillars was one of the missile team. In other circumstances, he might almost have been taken as asleep but Soth knew better. The aliens had reached the temple. But where were they?

The colonel found that his hands had tensed once more as he waited for Trooper Sokkoth to make his prearranged dash for the portico. The young soldier had volunteered to make the first advance and Soth had seen no reason to refuse him. Sokkoth himself had said, his eyes bright with ardour, that he was the least experienced and most expendable if the aliens had to be drawn into revealing themselves. He was correct, of course and the colonel wondered if this had been in Hoddish's mind as well when he let the recruit come in the first place. But there was no time for such melancholy thoughts.

A soft scrape of stone made Soth turn, to see Sokkoth vault out of the ditch on the other side of the road and sprint for the columns. The lad was fast and had almost reached the steps when he seemed to stumble and next second was face down, a small puff of dust rising with the soft thud of his fall, the clatter of his lasgun a brief underlining of his fate. Sokkoth himself made no sound. Of the alien sniper there had been not a trace.

Some of Soth's previous feeling of powerlessness returned as he scanned the shadows between the pillars. No sign! He scrutinised each section of the rim of the gently pitched, stone flagged roof. No sign! Their next, prearranged tactic in the event of the rear being guarded was to wait five minutes and make a concerted rush from three different directions. The colonel glanced to his right to check that Nibbeth was moving off, further down the conduit, prior to the charge but the wiry little man was standing pressed against the wall at the bottom of the ditch. He was signalling frantically for Soth to join him. In spite of his curiosity, Soth forced himself to descend with the greatest of care and crept along in the shadow of the wall, taking pains not to make any sound, until he was alongside the guardsman. Nibbeth's soft whisper was quick but clear: 'The alien's not on the roof. It's by the end column on the far side.'

'Where? Can you see him?'

'No.'

'But... How can you know?'

'It's where I would be.'

Nibbeth's tone was very matter-of-fact and he slightly shrugged his shoulders as he said it, as if to emphasise his own sniper's

badge. He continued, 'The roof's not high enough for a decent view and to get any kind of shot it would have had to skyline itself. With that ghost suit it can just stand against a corner column and watch both ways. It's on the far side because Sokkoth was almost across before it had a clear shot and dropped him.' The guardsman glanced briefly at the timepiece on his wrist, before looking his commanding officer straight in the eye. 'When the time to charge comes, sir, let Tarses go alone. It's a terrible risk for the sergeant but if we watch that end pillar, we'll have the best chance we'll get of nailing the devil.'

Soth thought back to when Sokkoth had saved his skin earlier that day. The young guard had been aided by the determined charge led by the big NCO, who would even now be working himself into a position to charge the other side of the portico. One of the colonel's saviours was already dead. Was the other to perish too? And to die charging alone, without his expected support? All this flashed through the commander's mind but in the end all he said, glancing at his own watch, was, 'Very well. Into place, quickly!'

As fast as caution allowed, he took up his position again, wondering with every cautious movement of his lasgun if a silent death was about to follow. He carefully sighted on the end column and, seemingly immediately, he heard Tarses' stentorian shout as he charged from the conduit. A shadow bulged from the pillar and there was the crack of a lasgun from beside him even as he fired himself. He took two more shots at the column but Nibbeth was out of the ditch and charging the portico. After a moment Soth leapt forward too and the two men reached the columns together. As they dashed into the shadows they saw Tarses pulling his bayonet from the fallen eldar. He looked up, his long scar pale against his dark skin and the gloom. He had no questions, no reproach or surprise, his quiet 'Sir?' merely a request for orders.

Soth lost no time. 'Nibbeth, far side. Tarses with me, this side.'

Nibbeth's compact form vanished silently into the dimness of the further reaches of the portico while Soth crept along the temple wall and the sergeant dashed in short sprints between the outside columns.

Two filthy alien scouts dead; two left to deal with. There would probably be one at the temple front. Could they somehow spot that alien too? The colonel moved quickly but kept close to the wall. Shaded by the portico it had captured none of the day's heat and felt chill where he brushed against it. It gave some sense of safety even if, as Soth grimly reflected, it was a purely illusory security.

As they approached the temple forecourt they moved far more cautiously. Soth crept around the corner column as Tarses moved to drop down the steps and crawl around the front of the building. It was quiet except for the barest rustle as the wind tumbled some dead thorn leaves across the flagstones.

Tarses died so quickly that his commander barely noticed. The colonel heard a slight hiss and then a series of thumps as the big sergeant's body tumbled down the steps. Heart in his mouth, Soth pressed his back to the pillar and stood, immobile.

Where was the devil? He dare not move and, tensed against the cold stone, he stared across at the shining doors of the temple. One had been blasted with some kind of alien demolition charge, a surprisingly neat hole blown clean through. The other remained intact, still glowing in all its glory, reflecting what little light there was left. Soth was surprised at how effective a mirror it made and, suddenly hopeful, he scanned it for any sign of the alien.

But he could see nothing other than the leaves, scraping in fits and starts over the stone as the wind caught them. They blew fitfully, barely moving, occasionally lodging against a column base or... Why had those leaves stopped, when others, close by, were still moving? There was no stone to stop them!

The colonel's heart skipped a beat. It must be the eldar scum! He stared at the reflection, desperately trying to make out even a hint of the shadowy outline he had been able to see up on the slopes when he had tackled the first scout. The reflection was too poor but he had a reasonable idea of where his enemy crouched. And, with a shock colder than the stone at his back Soth realised that in turn the eldar now knew exactly where he was! Even now his enemy was probably studying his reflection, waiting for him to move.

The commander had never felt so hopeless but the solid knot of anxiety in the pit of his stomach was hardening further to become a clenched mass of frustrated rage. He would have to try his luck. Perhaps his attempt would distract the alien enough for the wily Nibbeth to nail it. He stared at the reflection and prepared himself to move. Not normally religious, Soth surprised himself by mentally intoning a prayer to the Emperor that came back to him from his childhood – and then he lunged. Swinging around the column he let loose a volley of lasgun shots, their cracks echoing wildly off the stone and the vicious, red stabs tearing the gloom. There were further thuds and the clatter of falling arms.

Astonished, Soth realised he was still alive and that, from the outline he could now see sprawled on the flags, his enemy was dead. He fired a further shot into where he could see the fallen alien's head was and, as the echoes died, he cried out to Nibbeth. But there was no answer.

Where was the final scout? Deep within the temple or, alerted by the noise, hurrying to stalk them? Where for that matter was Nibbeth? There was another of the colonel's soft hisses of irritation as he strode forward. The irritation vanished in an instant as he stepped clear of a pillar and saw Nibbeth's body. The soldier lay face down, his lasgun under him. It was he, not Soth, who had distracted the alien at the crucial moment. Abruptly, the colonel turned on his heel and plunged through the blasted temple entrance.

Cautiously Soth surveyed the chamber. It was a plain room, without furnishings, only the pillars breaking the view to the end. Even the carvings were subdued, seeming as natural as the grain in the stone itself. All seemed clear and he began to jog to the end where he knew an ante-chamber gave access to a staircase which led to the control room for the irrigation system, as well as to the passages and cells of the priest's quarters. He felt a curious confidence. He had always liked the building, not from any particular spiritual motivation but for its lack of ostentation and the manner in which it blended the Imperial discipline so dear to him, with the shadowy past of the desert peoples of this world. If he was to face such a lethal foe as these aliens, here was a suitable battleground.

That he was to face the third eldar was clear as he approached the ante-chamber. Its door had been forced and from somewhere down the stairs he could hear the sounds of a struggle. He quickened his pace, while still trying to move as quietly as possible.

The steps down were worn and steep but the lighting was now brighter and Soth took them two at a time. On the small landing, one doorway, its ancient wooden door closed, led to the priest's apartments. Another entrance, its modern steel door blasted through, led into the control chamber. Lasgun at the ready, the colonel charged through. His quick brain, tuned to action, took in the scene in an instant.

The priest, Jarendar, had obviously surprised the alien as it tried to manipulate the irrigation controls. The two were now locked in a desperate struggle. The slight form of the eldar was backed against the bank of instruments while the massive priest, his back towards Soth and blocking any chance of a shot, was attempting to crush his squirming adversary. The priest was a powerful man but, for all that, he was no fighter and just as Soth entered, the foul alien heretic managed to break his hold, draw its laspistol and fire. The priest died with a grunt, the shot blasting through his chest. His body shielded the alien and Soth caught only a glimpse of a raised pistol and ghastly, gem-like lenses before there was another spurt of las-fire and the world went black.



IMMEDIATELY inside the great doorway, Soth leapt to one side and took cover behind one of the double row of pillars which mirrored those of the exterior. His eyes took a moment to adjust as the interior was brighter than the evening shade of the portico. It was not glaringly lit but soft lights, carefully hidden amongst the carved reliefs of the high walls, gave out a gentle glow. The long hall that comprised the bulk of the temple was flagged with the same worn sandstone as outside and seemed completely empty.

Soth was unsure how long he had been unconscious. It couldn't have been more than a few moments as, when he came painfully back to his senses, the alien was still working at the irrigation controls. His chest seemed a mass of searing agony as, with blurred eyes, he watched the eldar working. It was tall yet slight, and even its small movements, as it passed some glowing, crystal device over the control panel, seemed to have an inhuman grace about them. The other-worldly effect was heightened by its cameleoline cloak which even in the stark and brightly lit control room, still broke up its slender form to a remarkable degree.

Soth's thoughts were as fuzzy as his vision. He thought he saw Nibbeth's body lying next to the dead priest. Had they died, Sokkoth and Tarses, too, only for he, himself to fail? He must try to reach his lasgun. It was just beside him, its stock temptingly near. Could he retrieve it without alerting his enemy? The harrowing vision of the face of the first alien he had killed, the extra blank eye of the pistol wound staring from its forehead, seemed to superimpose itself on the back of the head of the scout working in front of him. It appeared to watch him, daring him to move. He screwed shut his eyes and tried to concentrate, driving the visions from his brain.

Wracked with pain, the colonel tensed himself and tried to move. The only result was even more agony somewhere under his ribs and an uncontrollable gasp that hissed from his lips. The alien turned, the strange crystal device still glowing, its strangely sensuous laspistol drawn in a movement of fluid grace. Soth stared helplessly up into the opalescent lenses of the blank mask as the creature walked lightly over, covering him with its weapon. It paused and almost in one movement, a quick flick from one of its gracile boots sent Soth's lasgun sliding well out of reach, and it was back working at the controls.

Soth trembled with agony and frustration but could do nothing. His head felt as if it was swimming from his body on a haze of pain and his vision seemed to be deteriorating further. He was sure he saw the ghost of Sokkoth creeping towards the alien from behind. He wanted to shout at the dead youth. To tell him it was all futile; that the lad had been correct, the aliens were

spirits and they could not be thwarted.

His lips quivered but no sound came. Sokkoth's wraith was almost upon the eldar now and was raising his lasgun to club the scout. The colonel stared at the apparition, his hazy world hovering between dream and reality. Why was this ghost carrying a non-regulation weapon? He would have to discipline it!

But somewhere on a deeper, more rational level of his brain, Soth recognised that it was not Sokkoth's ghost but the young temple novice Jarendar had talked about earlier, the minor component in the Emperor's plan. The weapon was not a lasgun but a candlestick. The candlestick came crashing down just as darkness descended once more on the colonel.



THIS TIME his period of unconsciousness must have lasted longer for when Soth came to again he was floating up the temple stairs. His head swam. Was his spirit being carried off to the Emperor? A face looked down at him, pallid in the bright lights. Soth recognised the insignia around the face's collar. They were the badges of a guard medic.

The colonel's eyes flickered and his lips moved soundlessly as he tried to speak. The medic, concern clear in his dark eyes, addressed him firmly: 'Don't try to talk, sir. You're badly wounded but we'll patch you up. The enemy have been driven back. The reinforcements are here as well and Captain Hoddish is organising the clean-up operations.'

Soth weakly shook his head. The pain was terrible but he felt he must speak. His lips shook but this time a weak, croaking voice was audible, 'Warn him!'

'Warn who, sir?' the medic frowned, plainly not understanding.

'Warn Hoddish. Tell him... tell him to look out for the minor components. Tell him it's the small cogs that count.'

The medic looked forward to where his companion was lifting the front of the stretcher. 'I think the colonel's delirious,' he said. ☺



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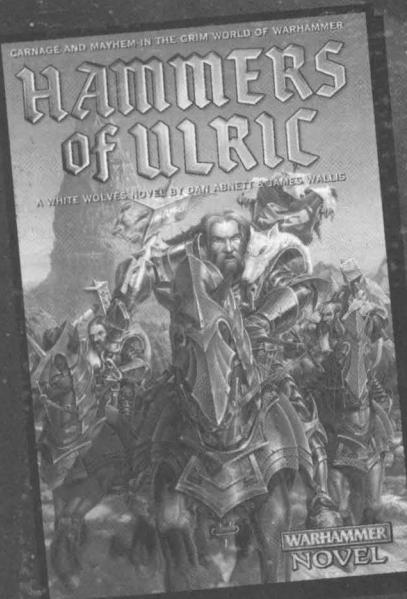
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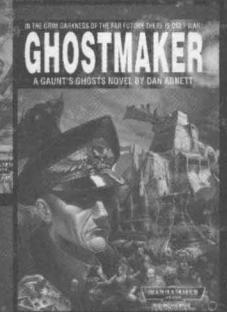
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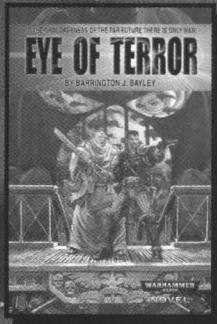
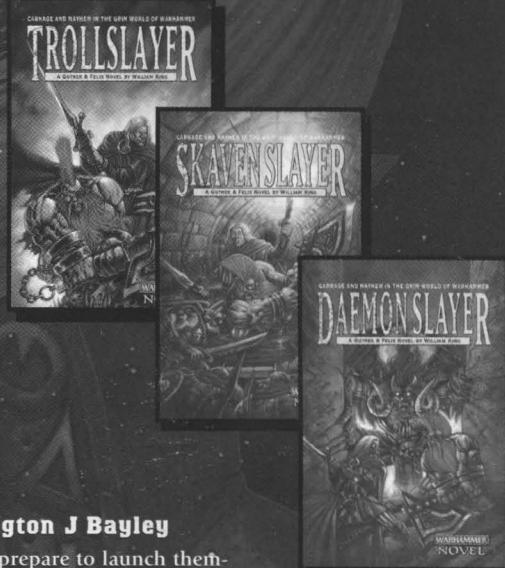
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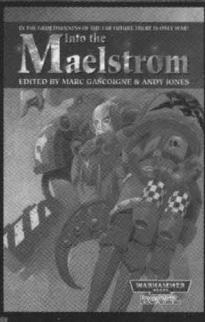
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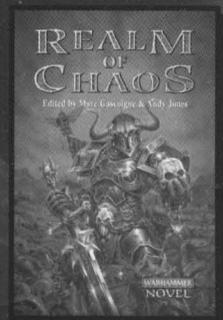
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A touch of irritation flickered across the knight's eyes. 'Using steel against the thing which now preys upon you is like trying to drown a fish. Against the vampire the peasant's only weapon is wood, his only shield garlic.'

'The... vampire?' François asked, eyes widening in horror. A chorus of whimpers and low curses rushed through his fellows, the sound as soft and insistent as the chill wind that even now tried the locks and hinges of the inn.

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• WHO MOURNS A NECROMANCER? by Brian Craig

The funeral cart made its slow way up the hill towards the Colaincourt Cemetery. The man who drove the cart and his companion both bore sullen scowls upon their faces, and the two dappled black mares which pulled it held their heads very low, as if they too had lost all enthusiasm for the work which was their lot. When the cemetery gates finally came into sight, a company of small boys ran from one of the side-streets, hurling mud and stones at the coffin which rested on the cart, crying: 'Necromancer! Necromancer!'

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• SMALL COGS by Neil Rutledge

As Colonel Soth stood on the gully edge, he unconsciously readjusted the bronze pectoral on his chest. It was a misplaced gesture of habit – but it saved the colonel's life. As he moved the bronze plate, something slammed into it with a sharp shock and hiss. It was more a reflex action than the impact that hurled Soth back over the lip of the gully. Sniper! His brain whirled as he moved, sliding and slipping as carefully as he could, following the gully downhill again. One pistol-armed guard colonel in ragged dress uniform against a near-invisible, needle rifle toting and possibly armoured eldar? He didn't give much for his chances!

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